

THE  
INTELLIGIBILITY  
OF THE  
ISLAMIC TRADITION  
IN THE CONTEXT OF  
MODERN THOUGHT

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## The Intelligibility of the Islamic Tradition in the Context of Modern Thought

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IN THE NAME OF ALLAH,  
MOST BENEFICENT, MOST MERCIFUL

I WOULD LIKE to briefly address some of the implications of the research paper commissioned by Tabah Foundation on Muhammad Shahrur's initiatives in theological and philosophical terrains. The object of this publication was to examine the consequences of certain ideas that serve the foundations on which a particular type of modern world-view rests and to seek an answer in the traditional classification and understanding of the sciences. The purpose of this examination was to attempt a delineation of those ideas as far as was pertinent and to try to reassert the traditional complementarity of the speculative disciplines with the practical.

The aim of the publication, in other words, was not simply to prove Shahrur wrong and the tradition right, but more simply to make the latter intelligible because the 'traditional' cannot be a thesis that needs to be established

or asserted, but rather a reality that demands recognition. The direct exposition of traditional doctrines is naturally not without controversy, but their elucidation will necessarily dissipate any objection brought against them if their exposition is judged not simply on the truths of the forms they attempt to represent, but more importantly on the truths they convey. To this end, the philosophical bias that might be perceived in the paper is not due to any partiality for intellectual arm-wrestling. It is rather to prepare the ground for a more direct exposition by clearing some of the obstacles that litter the mindscape of today, acting as they do as an opaque interface between what is read and what is understood.

It should be noted at the outset, though, that the details of Shahrur's particular explorations, or that of any other modernist 'reformer' for that matter, are of less interest than his underlying philosophical positions that encourage him to pronounce on the tradition in the first place. This is largely because whenever one pursues thinkers like Shahrur into their conceptual territory, they have a marked tendency to retreat into the vastness of their suppositions, reminiscent of the Russian Army before Napoleon. Such a retreat, however, is



invariably accompanied by a scorched earth policy of subjective understandings, so that any pursuer is incapacitated by the inability to appropriate objective reference points along the way. Needless to say, the long supply lines back to first principles become vulnerable, unworkable, and tantamount to ambush. It is wiser and more effective therefore to espouse the traditional examination of premises in the light of first principles, in order to better adjudicate questions of value as a precedent to the examination of subsequent contentions. As Aristotle wrote, a small mistake at the level of principle leads to a catastrophe at the level of the particular.<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, confusion at the level of the particular tends to invariably illustrate an error at the level of principle.

The increase of clarion calls for reform is particularly prescient in an age where a diminishing traditional philosophical theology remains the sole and effective hindrance to a wider social engineering project at work in the contemporary world. Before examining this further, however, it is important to say a few words about the role of philosophy in the coming and increasing requirement for a philosophical kalam literature, not only

for the verbal defence of the faith but also as an effective instrument for the removal of intellectual impediments.

The sin of today, if there be a singular prevailing one, is that of indifference fostered by relativism and cynicism. One can notice that real controversy or disputation is no longer of interest, since what is true has become of relative interest itself. To quote Erasmus of Rotterdam (d.1536), “every definition has become a misfortune.” This attitude of indifference stems from subjectivism, which is essentially a form of skepticism, since it eliminates the knowableness of objective truth. As we can clearly see in Shahrur’s thought, cognition itself is turned on its head, where instead of the mind subjecting itself to the objective order of things and thus assimilating objective reality, the mind is left to conceptually create for itself its own notions of reality. To clarify this further, subjectivism and autonomism are rooted in the disregard of objective truth and a refusal of unconditional subjection to it. The denial of objective truth here is a denial of the forms of certainty, which brings us to the loss of faith that is increasingly visible in our world. Interestingly, human psychology cannot divest itself of the notion or reality of certainty, because the very attempt

to do so involves an affirmation of it; this leads to the absurd position of being certain that one cannot be certain.

To simply assert the value of traditional sciences in this context therefore is of little use, if their implication is considered irrelevant. It is also not enough to decry this attitude but more importantly to appeal to those that adhere to it, by identifying the parameters of the conceptual interface that dissuades Muslims from understanding their religion, and by fashioning solutions that empower them to access the fullness of their intellectual and spiritual inheritance. Although such an interface might not be initially expressed in philosophical terms, it nevertheless rests on a particular philosophical worldview that demands further examination if it is to be dismantled.

The project of modernism has succeeded in asserting its viewpoint in all cultures and traditions, by enforcing its values in the way that contemporary man lives and participates in nature. As religion in this scheme no longer directs this participation, it becomes reduced to ritual in the private sphere, and reduced to politics in the public sphere. Politics, as a practical science however, cannot alone sustain the weight of the metaphysical dimensions

of faith, and thus lowers it to the realm of ideology, one amongst many others in the market place of ideologies. Politics in this way monopolizes religion, proclaiming itself as the only relevant outlet for its application in the public sphere. As religion calls for the adherence and nourishment of the totality of man, it is inevitably powerless to do so as a mere ideology and thus its practice becomes increasingly brittle, unfulfilling and ultimately fanatical when challenged as it lacks profundity. One way to remedy this impasse may be to demonstrate the integrity and continuity of spiritual doctrine in the practical realms that transcend the limitations of the political realm.<sup>2</sup>

As an example, one may encourage a built environment that reflects the principles and values of religion, not merely in its function but more importantly as expressed in its forms. It is important to recognise that philosophical systems abound in the world around us through *prima facie* the visual constructs of our built environments, which embody a philosophy that is imperceptibly imbibed daily. It is only secondarily that we absorb conceptual systems through our interactions with social models that we inhabit as well as educational systems that are chosen for us. What the thinker

fashions in concepts, the craftsman fashions in sound or form. The outcome can educate or poison whole swathes of society through the manipulation of forms in the public or private spheres. Here again the relationship of principle to form must be delineated, signified by the inseparability of making and thinking. Art, being the application of science, engenders a methodology in its application that must remain commensurate with the principles of the science.

To go back to philosophy, it is important to ask what is meant by a philosophical system. Not every exercise of rational thought can be considered philosophy, or else every form of self-expression can aspire to the title. First, what distinguishes philosophy from the other sciences is its mission to examine things in their ultimate causes rather than their proximate causes. By proximate cause is meant the cause that is next to hand for any event or fact. This is important in the necessary understanding of the demarcation of competencies inherent in the classification of the sciences.

The second distinction of philosophy from the other sciences is that it investigates and interrogates things by the light of natural reason. Natural reason is the faculty that every

man possesses, the faculty that is universal and necessary for the understanding of the world around us. However because reason is limited when it is unaided, it cannot stray into the domain of revelatory truths that are by nature supra rational and supernaturally provided. The science of first principles alone is the discipline that can apply reason within the domain of divinely revealed knowledge. What is the difference then between the two disciplines if both apply reason? Philosophy applies reason to things that are acquired naturally. Kalam applies reason to things that are acquired through revelation, and by doing so in effect subsumes much of the relevant philosophical activity.

How does one distinguish a false philosophy then in this context from a true system of philosophy? What standard can one apply for this identification? Primarily one can say that revelation provides a negative standard, revealing to reason certain truths that protect it from error because reason cannot claim independence. In this scheme it is reason that must be submitted to the truths of revelation, because they are infallible, rather than subject the truths of revelation to fallible reason. To declare reason to be independent from

revelation is therefore to be irrational, because it is reasonable to submit to truth.

The intellectual system that Shahrur sought to reinforce, that of modern critical and idealist thinking, is European in origin and historical development. The emphasis on western philosophy in the paper presented therefore was a consequence of this reality. The key controlling idea to grasp when analysing critical thought is that the effect of the Renaissance facilitated the substitution of the heretofore unity of knowledge for the universality of knowledge as an epistemological goal. This was not only a shift in the ordering of the sciences but also in their significance and scope, with enormous repercussions for the modern understanding of science. It is well to remember here that the “modern” is understood as a philosophical contention, an intellectual construct, rather than a time frame as first advocated by the father of historical periodization, the German historian Christophorus Cellarius (d.1707).<sup>4</sup>

The reformulation of world-views that took place at the close of the Medieval period in Europe led philosophers to lose the habit of regarding the practical world in the light of the most profound principles. These principles

demanding that the speculative order never be subjected to the practical order, and yet also never separated. The verbal or definitional disorder in philosophy is symptomatic of and consequent to such a loss of hierarchy and unity between the two orders of science.

The first aspect of unity is that which is activated by the notion of science, namely in its reduction of multiplicity to the unity of thought which resides in the primary unity of the knower. That is to say that the connections and inter-relational aspects of knowledge are united in the knower. Traditional cosmology ensured that man did not see oneself in things (as the modernists contend), but rather see things in oneself. The second aspect for unity is that of the principle that unites the science within itself, but which cannot be derived from within itself. The principle that cannot be further reduced, or gone behind, must be provided from without the science. In mathematics, the unit is the first principle, as it cannot be reduced further. It is derived from metaphysics not from mathematics, just as the first principles of physics are derived from mathematics.

In this vein, and contrary to Shahrur's belief, the lack of an applied positivist science as a



signature of earlier ages serves as a distinction of wisdom rather than crudity. It has long been established that the examination of efficient causes in the physical world was inexhaustible, an inexhaustibility that rendered such examination inevitably unintelligible when the final causes remained unacknowledged. The failure to identify such causes necessarily leads to an epistemic search that is ever changing and ultimately futile, since there is no starting-point and therefore no final end or destination. Incoherence is inevitably the consequence of this approach.

It is our contention that the traditional classification of knowledge is at the heart of redressing the imbalance caused by the modern world-view. This can be illustrated in this way: If one were to propose that the physical world was the sole reality, the first step in understanding this proposition would be to identify what type of knowledge it lays claim to, to what realm of science it belongs. This is important for determining the type of demonstration required in accordance with the science in question, and more importantly, identifying the relevant evidence needed for its assertion or rebuttal as a proposition. The order of knowledge, therefore, cannot be fully

understood without ultimately recognizing that modes of knowledge are determined by modes of being. As the inter-relational aspect of the traditional sciences becomes less of a reality, a thorough revisiting of the hierarchy of knowledge becomes surely imperative.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This well-known epithet is commonly referred to in mediaeval literature. The words are in effect: *Parvus error in principio magnus est in fine* (a small error at the beginning leads to a great error in conclusion). See Aristotle's *De Caelo*, Bk.1, 271b. 8-13.

<sup>2</sup> The arts and crafts provide a good example of how an accessible practical discipline may be lived to serve an intellectual and spiritual end.

<sup>3</sup> See his *Historia Universalis*, written in 1686.



