

What is Islamic Philosophy?

ROY JACKSON



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What is Islamic Philosophy?

“This excellent book provides a user-friendly introduction to the emergence and subsequent developments of Islamic philosophy. Jackson’s problem oriented approach also shows, in a skilful manner, the relevance of this philosophy to some of the most pressing issues of our time in important fields such as politics, ethics and religion.”

Ali Paya, *University of Westminster (UK), Islamic College (UK), and National Research Institute for Science Policy (Iran)*

What is Islamic Philosophy? offers a broad introduction to Islamic thought, from its origins to the many challenging issues facing Muslims in the contemporary world. The chapters explore early Islamic philosophy and trace its development through key themes and figures up to the twenty-first century.

Topics covered include:

- ethical issues such as just war, abortion, women’s rights, homosexuality and cloning
- questions in political philosophy regarding what kind of Islamic state could exist and how democratic can (or should) Islam really be
- the contribution of Islam to ‘big questions’ such as the existence of God, the concept of the soul, and what constitutes truth.

This fresh and original book includes a helpful glossary and suggestions for further reading. It is ideal for students coming to the subject for the first time as well as anyone wanting to learn about the philosophical tradition and dilemmas that are part of the Islamic worldview.

Roy Jackson is Reader in Philosophy of Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. He has many years’ experience of lecturing in Philosophy and Religion at a number of universities. His books include *Fifty Key Figures in Islam* (2006), *Nietzsche and Islam* (2007), *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam* (2010), and *The God of Philosophy* (2011).

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First published in 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

And published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Jackson, Roy, 1962-

What is Islamic philosophy? / Roy Jackson.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Islamic philosophy. I. Title.

B741.J29 2014

181'.07-dc23

2013034764

ISBN: 978-0-415-63202-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-63203-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-81755-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

To Annette ... my 'LC'

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see, hear and act through God; the third journey results in the extinction of the self entirely; finally, the saint returns to the world in order to fulfil the spiritual and philosophical duty to guide others along the spiritual path. As a slight aside, but interesting nonetheless, is Sadra's view of the path of the soul upon the death of the body, for the soul is not entirely disembodied but possesses a body which is 'woven' by the actions that the person engaged in during their earthly life and so, if someone has led a particularly evil life, they will end up in hell, weighed down by bodily sins. Sadra's philosophy is a fascinating study, and there is still much to be explored. Thankfully, more recent thinkers such as Henry Corbin, James Morris, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Fazlur Rahman have been devoting their energies to producing important works on the philosopher.

Incidentally, for Sadra, the Quran – as it is the word of God – is also Being itself, and so part of Sadra's own philosophical pursuit is to study and write commentaries on the Quran. He was opposed to only a literal, or 'outer', interpretation of the text, instead emphasizing its inner meaning, and this is where Sufism can particularly contribute while, at the same time, stressing that one should not ignore the literal meaning altogether; rather a balance between the two is preferred.

Soroush

The Iranian philosopher Abd al-Karim **Soroush** (born 1945) is an important thinker on the topic of religious knowledge and how this relates to reason. His best-known work, *The Hermeneutical Expansion and Contraction of the Theory of Shari'a*, is particularly concerned with epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. Soroush has a strong familiarity with Western philosophical ideas, which he synthesizes with his in-depth knowledge of the traditional Islamic sciences, as well as an awareness of more contemporary trends in Islamic intellectual thought, a man very much in touch with the Islamic *zeitgeist*. In his work on hermeneutics he raises the issue of the role of religion in the modern world, and he argues that it is quite possible for Islamic culture and values to survive whilst a society is modernized and secularized; the two need not conflict with one another. It is these arguments for a synthesis of religious knowledge and authority with that of secular and political liberalism that has resulted in Soroush being labelled the 'Martin Luther of Islam' (although this is a label also given more recently to Tariq Ramadan, see Chapter 6).

Soroush was born in Tehran and he attended the Alavi High School, which was sufficiently liberal to allow him to have religion and science as part of its curriculum. He went on to study pharmacy at university in Tehran and, after graduation, he spent his two years 'military' service as director of the Laboratory for Food Products, Toiletries and Sanitary Materials. He left Iran to continue his studies in England in the mid to late 1970s. During this time abroad, events in Iran were to take a severe turn in its history: when Soroush left for England, Iran was a prosperous, pro-Western democratic state ruled by an

Oxford-educated Shah. However, when Soroush returned to Iran in 1979, it had undergone a revolution and was now an anti-Western, impoverished theocracy ruled by an Ayatollah and the Shia Islamic clergy. This Ayatollah's name was **Khomeini**, and more will be said about this charismatic individual in Chapter 6, for his philosophical background and his rise to effective ruler of a state raises interesting issues, especially in the field of political philosophy. Despite the growth in prosperity in Iran during the early 1970s, there were many anti-government demonstrations, especially amongst the intellectual elite, young students and the poorer classes outside of the more prosperous cities. The Shah responded to this with increased oppression and made use of technology and weapons provided by the West to impose his rule, which resulted in greater anti-Western feeling. As a result, riots broke out in many Iranian cities, led by the Shia clergy who were seen as liberators. This is what became the Iranian Cultural Revolution. The principal ideologue, Khomeini, directed the demonstrations from his refuge in Paris. By late autumn of 1978 Iran was virtually in a state of civil war and, in January of 1979, the Shah fled abroad. Soon after that Khomeini returned to Iran as their new hero and ruler.

Soroush, while residing in England during these tumultuous times, nonetheless kept an eye on events and he became active amongst Muslim groups in London, whilst also continuing his studies, first acquiring an MSc in analytical chemistry at the University of London and then researching the field of history and the philosophy of science at Chelsea College. Outside of his formal studies, he developed an interest in significant Iranian thinkers, notably Ali Shariati (see Chapter 6), and took to giving public lectures, some of which were published in his first work *Dialectical Antagonism*, which was a criticism of Iranian leftist and Marxist movements. He then wrote *The Restless Nature of the World*, which looked at the foundations of Islamic philosophy. Both of these works were published in Tehran and, consequently, upon his return to Iran, his reputation preceded him. He was seen as an ideological ally by Khomeini, to the extent that the latter was personally involved in the appointment of Soroush to the Advisory Council of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, Soroush became director of the Islamic Culture Group at Tehran's Teacher Training College. Soroush's task as a member of the Advisory Council, together with six other members, was to completely restructure the university syllabi so that all knowledge was 'Islamicized'. This, in practice, resulted in the expulsion of a number of academics and students from these universities who did not fit with the new ideology, and also a number of scholars were arrested, imprisoned and, indeed, executed.

Khomeini's enthusiasm for Soroush may have been misguided, however, especially as the new Iranian Republic became more oppressive. Soroush left his post on the Advisory Council after four years, citing 'professional differences', and in 1983 he became a member of the research staff for the Institute for Cultural Research and Studies until 1997. During the 1990s, Soroush became increasingly critical of the Iranian rulers and argued for religious pluralism and tolerance and the use of hermeneutics (see below and Chapter 9). He

voiced his views through the monthly magazine *Kiyan*, which he co-founded. As a result, the Islamic Republic forced the magazine to close down in 1998. As Soroush himself became the subject of state harassment and censorship, he has moved his activities abroad since 2000, as a visiting scholar in Harvard University teaching Rumi poetry, philosophy, Islam and democracy, Quranic studies and philosophy of Islamic law. He is also a scholar in residence at Yale University, and he taught Islamic political philosophy at Princeton. This admirable track record of scholarship highlights his importance for Islamic philosophy today. A key theme throughout much of his work is the emphasis on the coherence of Islamic knowledge with that of 'secular' thought, with the latter understood as what is regarded as rational and scientific, rather than 'anti-religion'. In this sense, it is not the case of religious versus secular, because Soroush argues that Islam is neither irrational nor non-scientific, for the developments in science and knowledge do not necessarily come at the expense of religion, but rather they work together mutually in helping us to understand religion and its proper place in society.

Soroush's emphasis on the tools of hermeneutics is a growing field amongst Islamic scholars today, perhaps most notably promulgated by the controversial figure of Nasr Hamid Abu **Zayd**, who was born 1943 in Tantra, Egypt. It is worth devoting a little space to Zayd here before returning to Soroush's views. Zayd studied and lectured in Islamic studies at the University of Cairo. However, in 1995, the tenure committee refused him tenure as a result of an unfavourable report. This raised some eyebrows considering the scholarly level of his work and his case was brought to the attention of the Egyptian press. Subsequently the Egyptian Appellate Court also ruled in favour of a suit brought against Zayd by an Islamist lawyer. This suit required that Zayd be forcibly divorced from his wife on the grounds that he is an apostate. It was this particular case that attracted the foreign media, and he now lectures at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands. The case of Zayd is relevant here because of what his works represent, for he is a strong proponent of the use of the tools of hermeneutics, particularly in relations to Quranic tafsir ('interpretation'). The case of Zayd also raises an important question: just how far can textual analysis go before the text ceases to have any objective value at all? This was a concern of the French philosopher Paul **Ricoeur** (1913–2005) in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic in that, for Ricoeur, it offers no methodology for gaining real meaning and becomes too subjective (see Chapter 9).

Not surprisingly, Soroush's views on the use of hermeneutics raises similar concerns to those of Zayd and proved too contentious for the Iranian clergy. Like Zayd, Soroush argues that while the Quran, as the word of God, is pure, absolute and, therefore, unchanging, it is also important to take into account that the receivers of revelation are tied to a particular time and place that is inevitably subject to change, evolution and a particular perspective on the world. Those who receive revelation must interpret God's word so that they can understand it, and this inevitably results in a particular, rather than a

universal, understanding of revelation. Whilst the word of God does not change, the *interpretation* of it does. Therefore, no interpretation is fixed and unchanging and no one culture, group, time period or individual has a monopoly on what is the right or wrong interpretation of the sacred sources. It logically follows that, while Soroush accepts the importance of the Islamic scholars – the clergy included – in their struggle to understand the word of God, it does not follow from this that we should accept their interpretation. This view is perhaps even more contentious amongst the Shia clergy than the Sunni, because religious knowledge is considerably more hierarchical in the former than the latter, which has led some to compare Shia Islam to Catholicism in this respect. In Shia Islam especially, much theological scholarship argues for religious knowledge as ‘inherited’ and privy to the elite clergy, whereas Soroush is presenting a much more democratic rendering, which would amount to an act of heresy for many of the ruling religious elite.

Soroush, then, considered religious knowledge to be effectively no different from other forms of knowledge in the sense that it is an evolving phenomenon that operates within certain specified parameters that qualifies it as ‘religious’ as opposed to, say, scientific or historical. In fact, these parameters are not exclusive, but overlap, and to some degree it makes little sense to talk of knowledge as divided into religious and scientific, for one form of knowledge affects another. This does not result in relativism for Soroush in terms of knowledge, for there are unchangeable truths – the actual word of God – which religion can reveal, but non-religious scientific knowledge can assist in revealing these truths rather than undermining them.

Soroush, however, has succeeded in offending the Shia clergy further by questioning the legitimacy of the contentious concept *vilayat-i faqih* (‘guardianship by the clergy’), which was the central teaching of Khomeini’s political philosophy. This philosophy will be considered in more detail in Chapter 6, but, briefly for the moment, Khomeini argued that the clergy have a religious duty to rule directly and not simply advise the government or, for that matter, stay out of political affairs altogether, as some Ayatollahs would contend. This view is contentious because it has little Quranic support, and Soroush questioned that Ayatollahs, being merely human, could possibly claim to possess a monopoly on religious knowledge. For Soroush, the knowledge that even the clergy possessed was human and, as such, fallible. Whilst this democratic approach to religious knowledge encourages people to search for knowledge themselves rather than to imitate or obey the rulings of religious clergy, this did not, inevitably, find favour with the clergy themselves.

Sharia, for Soroush, was subject to ‘expansion and contraction’, and by that he meant that it was not an infallible and static thing, but subject to a much broader framework of knowledge *per se*, which included science, mathematics, medicine, philosophy and so on. If it were to be contained within too narrow a framework, then its potential for true understanding and flexibility would be severely limited. Soroush presents a theory of knowledge under three general principles: first, the principle of coherence and correspondence (any

understanding of religion bears on the body of human knowledge and tries to be in coherence with the latter); second, the principle of interpretation (a contraction or expansion in the system of human knowledge may penetrate the domain of our understanding of religion); and finally, the principle of evolution (the system of human knowledge is subject to expansion and contraction). In his work *Let us Learn from History*, Soroush casts an empirical eye on history to demonstrate that mankind is, in a very Hobbesian sense, weak and inclined to commit acts of evil, rather than adopting the more Rousseauian depiction of Man as innately good. Soroush has not shied away from criticizing many of the Shia clergy, accusing them of sacrificing the basic tenets of Islam for the sake of their own selfish gains. He has championed the cause of democracy because he believes it is the best system for Islam to thrive. People must be free to believe or not, and Islam, or any religion, cannot be imposed upon a people from above, which is what many Shia clergy try to do. Soroush has stressed that the clergy have no a priori right to rule, and that the people should choose rulers. To an extent, some of the clergy would not disagree with Soroush on some points, in particular that they should steer clear from political rule because of its corrupting influence, whereas other members of the clergy would dispute this, arguing that the clergy, because of their knowledge of what is good, would do nothing other than good and would be resistant to the corrupting powers of absolute rule.

Rumi

Soroush is a scholar of Rumi, and the former's views on religious knowledge makes this attachment to the Sufi mystic quite understandable. Here we need to consider another kind of knowledge or, rather, another way of accessing knowledge. In considering the Illuminationists we have, to some degree, seen the importance of knowledge as 'intuitive' and this is very much within the Sufi mystical tradition, but no account of a Sufi epistemology could leave out some reference to probably the greatest Sufi mystic of them all, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī, better known as **Rumi** (1207–73). Rumi is also particularly relevant here as someone who began as a *mufiti* (a legal functionary) and hence is considered something of an expert in religious knowledge, as well as a poet and mystic and, therefore, an exponent of what is often referred to as esoteric knowledge.

Rumi was born at Balkh in the northern Persian province of Khorasan. This was, at that time, a flourishing city that, it is said, contained some 40 mosques, which is an indication of its size and religious activity. Rumi's family had lived in Balkh for several generations and their noble lineage was highly respected. In fact, they claimed descent from Arabic, rather than Persian, stock originally to the extent of family connections with the first rightly-guided caliph, Abu Bakr. Balkh, however, was invaded by Mongols and so, when he was just 12 years of age, Rumi and his family fled the city. There is an apocryphal story that while in Damascus in 1221, Rumi was seen walking behind his father by the great