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Philosophy in the Islamic Tradition: Implications for the Philosophy for Children (P4C) Program

The advancement of information and communication technologies has accelerated the process of communication and information exchange in the form of audio, video and texts across the globe. Not only has it accelerated the process but it has also magnified the volume and quantity. The Internet with all the available forums and websites is exposing ideas and transmitting thoughts, ideologies, beliefs, opinions, values, news, and images across civilization that are accessible to all who possess the tools. There is often the tendency for civilizational conflict, seen from the negative perspective, or dialogue, seen positively. In the past, individual countries could live in peace by adhering to their own cultures, traditions, and values, sometimes oblivious to events in other parts of the world; but today this is not possible. In fact, the dominant civilizations whose leaders are ethical absolutists would consider it rightful to impose their moral values upon weak countries out of a belief in the superiority of their values.

This has been the case for many countries in the Muslim world from the sixteenth century onward as they were colonized and subjugated by Western powers. This was very much in contrast to the Chinese civilization, whose naval admiral arrived with a large fleet of ships in Malacca in the fifteenth century, but did not colonize the Malay world. These Muslim countries were only able to attain their independence from the yoke of colonization in the mid-1900s. Independence gave them a new lease on life and raised awareness of the importance of developing a sense of identity, different from that of the colonial master, just as the United States had created its American English language to be different from the English of its colonial master in such a way as to assert its independence and identity.

However, after years of colonization, it has not been easy for these countries to establish new values and identities. The Western powers had really colonized them not only physically but also mentally, not only in form but also in substance. Thus, Muslim countries have been left in turmoil with frequent crises in thought. There is a crisis between traditional values and thoughts anchored in religion on the one hand, and modern thought that has been secularized, anchored not so much in tradition and religion as in reason, on the other. There is a range of fundamentalism as there is a range of liberalism. The leaders and government are seen by the masses as liberal and secular, while the leaders see their people as fundamentalist or orthodox. The fundamentalists cherish the period when Islam was at its height in the early *salaf al-salih* period, while the liberal secularists desire to be cut loose from the "chains" of religion. They might agree with Marx's philosophy that religion is the opium of the people and thus they must be rid of it. This growth of modern ideologies in the Muslim world has caused a

rupture in Muslim society. According to Muslim scholars such as al-Attas,[1] the Western powers have been successful in secularizing the Muslim mind through the education system by imparting secularized or Westernized knowledge. This has led to a loss of *adab,* or the proper discipline that enables one to do justice to oneself and society through Islamic knowledge, and even to the loss of the individual's relationship with the Creator. Consequently, this new situation and in particular the Muslim leaders who worsened it and caused more confusion with the secularized ideas they propagated have confused the Muslim mind. Today Muslims are confronted not only with liberalism, secularism, fundamentalism, positivism, existentialism, and Marxism, but also postmodernism. How can Muslim minds withstand this onslaught? How can the Muslim scholars or *ulama*— whether traditional or modern—comprehend this without any knowledge of philosophy or Western thought? This paper is an attempt to delineate the role philosophy used to have in the Islamic tradition, its decline and near demise, its present necessity, and the struggle it encounters as it is rejuvenated, whether in the university or in society. It is in this context that the Philosophy for Children Program will be discussed.

1. Philosophy in the Muslim Tradition

Islamic philosophy grew from the intellectual exchanges involving Syrians, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, and others, reflecting the richness of the Muslim cultures. The development of Islamic philosophy, and also much of the sciences among the Arabs, has its roots in Islam. Before the rise of Islam, the Arabs' chief cultural legacies were poetry and literary traditions. Islam provided the Arabs with a coherent worldview that moved them to answer the questions it raised. The Holy *Qur'an,*[2] which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, played a significant role in the rise of Islamic sciences, both the traditional and the rational. It contained principles and precepts on how Muslims were to live. Since the Prophet himself was the living example of the *Qur'an*, the Prophetic Way or Tradition (*al-Sunnah*) was considered to be a companion to the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* has been well preserved and was fixed into an authorized version at the time of the third Caliph, about 20 years after the demise of the prophet. On the other hand, such a vast amount of material had been added to the original core of the Prophet's Tradition that an elaborate science of tradition had to be developed around the ninth century to sift out the falsified traditions.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the great scholars during the early period of Islamic history were of two kinds. The first were primarily the commentators or traditionists who studied and analyzed the texts of the *Qur'an* and the Traditions. The second were the juriconsults (*fuqaha'*) who interpreted the legal aspects of the *Qur'an* and their application to concrete cases. The criteria for settling legal or doctrinal problems were purely linguistic or textual. But later there emerged scholars who permitted the use of analogy (*qiyas*) or independent judgment (*ra'y*) in doubtful matters, especially when a specific textual basis for a decision could not be found in the *Qur'an*. The conservative traditionists tended to repudiate the use of any deductive method.

[1] Naquib al-Attas, 1978.

[2] In most Western work it is spelled Koran, which does not give the accurate transliteration and thus, pronunciation.

"Their position is best epitomized by the comment of Malik on the Koranic reference to God's 'sitting upon the throne.'[3] 'The sitting,' he is reported to have said, 'is known, its modality is unknown. Belief in it is an obligation and raising questions regarding it is heresy (*bid'ah*).'"[4]

This approach to questions raised from the study of the Qur'anic texts could not stand the test of time, especially with the expansion of the Muslim territories, which brought Muslims into contact and confrontation with paganism and Christianity. Moral and legal questions were raised about God's overwhelming supremacy in the world as depicted in the *Qur'an*, its bearing on the responsibility of human agents, and the necessity of safeguarding the Islamic view of life.[5] By the seventh century, discussions began to center around complex questions derived from the *Qur'an* such as divine justice and human responsibility, free will and predestination, the possibility of seeing God on Judgment Day, and interpretation of the anthropomorphic passages.

The attempt to resolve these problems led to the rise and development of Islamic scholastic theology. Theology became an issue when Muslims felt the need to systematize the metaphysical worldview of Islam and to reconcile apparent contradictions and difficulties. Thus from the early years of Islam, the community has been involved in various controversies which struck at the religion. The notion of the Muslim way of life became a contested concept. According to Leaman, "None of these controversies were *philosophical* in the sense that they embodied the sort of philosophical thinking which came later to be transmitted from the Greeks to the Islamic world. This kind of philosophy first appeared in the ninth century under the Abbasid dynasty."[6] The rise of scholastic theology gave the Muslims a strong reason for studying Greek philosophy—so much so that during the Abbasid period, many works of Plato and Aristotle were translated into Arabic. Thus Leaman argues that "it would be a mistake to regard philosophy in Islam as starting with the translation of Greek texts."[7] He asserts that even before the introduction of Greek logic, Muslims were involved in philosophical arguments in the fields of jurisprudence, the nature of law, analogy, and meaning. It would not be surprising if they even welcomed the contribution of Aristotelian logic for conceptual clarification in these areas. But Greek logic rivaling the Islamic reasoning process of analogy led to a great deal of argument, especially when some considered it an alien science that glorified Greece and Greek traditions.

2. The Loss of Philosophy from the Muslim Tradition

The arrival of Greek philosophy on the intellectual scene challenged many of the traditional Islamic sciences and threatened traditional experts. The Mu'tazilites, who were more closely aligned to the philosophers, attempted to provide a more rational basis for Islam; the most significant of their ideas concerned the importance of reason in guiding Muslims to knowledge of God and the belief in the agreement of reason with revelation. They desired that the Scriptural texts be subjected to the scrutiny of phi-

[3] Koran 7, 54 and 20, 5.

[4] Majid Fakhry, 2004, p. xix.

[5] Ibid., p. xx.

[6] Leaman, 1992, p. 5.

[7] Ibid., p. 6.

losophical thought. The interpretation of the Mu'tazilites was challenged by the conservative element, which dissociated itself from philosophy on the ground that it was impious or foreign. The Mu'tazilites were challenged by the Ash'arites, who argued vehemently that reason alone is incapable of establishing satisfactorily the basic themes of Islam. By employing Greek logic, Al-Ghazali vigorously attacked the philosophers, particularly al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), on three grounds of heresy. His argument was based on the philosophers' belief in the eternity of the world, their denial of physical resurrection, and their claim that God cannot know individuals or particulars.

This theological division disrupted the whole of the Muslim community. The situation worsened when this theological school was adopted by the Caliph, who made a state official doctrine resulting in the persecution of Muslims who rejected the Mu'tazilite interpretation of Islam. Consequently, freedom of thought and conscience was curbed. Al-Ghazali's attack on philosophy and the philosophers through his work *Tahafut al-falasifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*)[8] was defended by Ibn Rushd (Averroes). He presented Aristotelian arguments in his philosophical work, *Tahafut at-Tahafut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), which wielded considerable influence in Christian Europe but did not have much effect upon the Islamic world.

Despite their contradictions, both the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites shared the principle that reason was useful in understanding religion, but rejected the use of Greek philosophy in analyzing religious concepts. Why did these Muslim scholars, who appreciated reason and rational explanation as the basis for religion, refuse Greek philosophy? Learman gave two possible explanations.[9] First, the space which philosophy sought to occupy was *already* filled by theology, the theory of language, and a well-developed jurisprudence. Philosophy appeared to be an interloper into a field of problems that were already taken care of quite adequately by other theoretical devices and from other speculative perspectives. Second, the conclusions offered by philosophy often ran counter to important principles of Islamic theology. So the idea that philosophy was an *alien* way of thinking grew and it became suspect.

3. The Necessity of Bringing Philosophy Back into the Curriculum

Al-Ghazali has been blamed in some Muslim quarters for the decline of philosophical thought in the Muslim world, despite Ibn Rushd, because of his strong critique of Greek philosophy. However, some scholars such as Qadir[10] defended al-Ghazali by arguing that he was not completely against philosophy, but in fact considered mathematics and logic useful and worthy of acquisition. Although al-Ghazali never regarded himself as a philosopher, he thought that it was important to master philosophy before criticizing it. He was able to present his arguments brilliantly in his work *Tahafut al-falasifa*. Although he opposed Greek philosophy and its development in Islam, he advocated fervently the study and use of logic. He claimed that Aristotelian syllogisms

[8] Al-Ghazali, 1958.
[9] Learman, 1992, p. 13.
[10] Qadir, 1988.

were already used and recommended in the *Qur'an*. He even illustrated Aristotelian logic with examples from Islamic law.[11]

He agreed with the philosophers that "there are cases where concealment (*taqiya*) of the truth is no bad thing, that lying is not intrinsically wrong and may be employed if a praiseworthy end is unattainable by other means."[12] It is unfortunate that this aspect of al-Ghazali's thought has not been highlighted. In fact, the criticism against philosophy was reiterated by another great fourteenth century Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun, who is also recognized as the father of sociology through his epic work, *Muqaddima*.[13] Thus, aside from the illuminationist or ishraqi school of philosophical thought, philosophy was abandoned by the Muslim community.

It was only in the nineteenth century that the Muslim world began to hear the rallying call to revive the philosophical spirit of inquiry from Jamaluddin al-Afghani, the great reformer. His thoughts, which were also known as the modernist spirit, were disseminated by his disciple-scholar in Egypt, Muhammad Abduh, who attempted to reform the Al-Azhar University, the oldest university in the world. Abduh attempted to reform Muslim education, which was steeped in the traditional Islamic sciences, by reviving the rational, philosophical sciences. Similar efforts were exerted on the Indian subcontinent through the works of reformers such as Iqbal[14] and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and in the Malay World through the works of Hamka, Sheykh Ahmad al-Hadi, Za'aba, S. M. Naqib Al-Attas, S. Hussein Al-Attas, and others. Another contemporary scholar who has written extensively on this matter is S. H. Nasr. Why is there a need to revive the philosophical spirit of inquiry in the Muslim world? There is a prevailing view that the Muslim world fell into a deep slumber intellectually after the fall of philosophy in the twelfth century and the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in the thirteenth century. As the West experienced its Enlightenment, the Muslims fell behind until many Muslim countries were colonized by the West between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

It was during the period of colonization that Muslims became aware of their intellectual and material shortcomings. In fact, most of the reformers mentioned above had experienced living in Europe, albeit briefly, and so came to realize the gravity of their situation. There was a feeling that the religion of Islam, which was supposed to be enlightening and liberating, had failed them. And the root cause was the traditional scholars, who seemed to wield so much power to capture Muslim minds, acting as priests when no such class should exist in the Islamic tradition, and when acquisition of the traditional Islamic sciences is obligatory for every Muslim. Their authority had led Muslims to believe in blind imitation and indoctrination without much use of their reason to study and understand the *Qur'an* and Prophetic Traditions. Their understanding of the worldview was also distorted, in the sense that they were very much inclined toward the spiritual world and seemed to neglect their fate in this world, although this could have been due to lethargy and the loss of self-esteem and self-confidence after being colonized for such a long period.

Traditional education was healthy in the traditional Islamic sciences, but there was a vacuum when it came to the rational, philosophical sciences, aside from Islamic

[11] Al-Ghazali, 1978.
[12] Learman 1992, p. 19.
[13] Khaldun, 1969.
[14] Iqbal, 1936.

theology and logic, which were still taught but used a weak approach in which knowledge was to be acquired and memorized, not used as a tool for conceptual clarification and problem solving. It was in light of this that these reformers called for the revival of the natural and applied sciences in order to be technologically sound, and the revival of philosophy so as to be able to understand the new world and the Western thought that seemed to permeate every sphere of life. They sought to reconcile Islam with this new situation, just as early philosophers like al-Kindi had had to reconcile Greek philosophy and Islamic thought, or like al-Farabi had attempted to reconcile reason and revelation. What is needed is not so much the content of Western philosophy, because the Islamic tradition had a rather well-developed theory of metaphysics and ethics, but rather philosophy as a tool for thinking, for clear argument, for clarifying conceptual muddles, for reasoning analogically, for recognizing ambiguities and tautologies, for examining assumptions, and discovering fallacies in thinking and argument. This tool is very important now to help Muslim youth make proper decisions about living in this world that today is more plural in all respects— in thoughts, cultures, ethics, and beliefs.

However, there has to be prudence in teaching philosophy—particularly Western philosophy—in the Muslim world, in light of the early experience of the Mu'tazilites who were considered to have transgressed the limit by exerting the superiority of reason over revelation, thereby throwing the Muslim world into a state of chaos. For that reason it is important for Muslims who study philosophy to be acquainted with the traditional Islamic sciences to avoid the issue of heresy.[15]

4. The Role of Philosophy for Children (*Hikmah*) in Philosophic Revival

How has the Muslim world responded to the call of these reformers? In most parts of the Muslim world today the importance of the sciences for material, medical, agricultural and technological development has been understood, and the education systems have been reformed to include these sciences in the curriculum, from kindergarten to higher education. One can see that these sciences are needed for practical reasons. However, the same cannot be said of philosophy. There is hardly any department of philosophy in universities in Malaysia. In all cases, philosophy has been merged with theology in the faculty of Islamic sciences, to be the preserve of the theologians. What is offered in university departments is the philosophy of a discipline, such as philosophy of education or science. Logic is not taught at all, although recently the elements of logic have been introduced into the secondary school mathematics curriculum, but to no effect, since it is taught for at most three hours, and in isolation from real life problems.

It is in light of this need for a philosophical tool that I see the usefulness of the Philosophy for Children program. It emphasizes critical and ethical thinking based on stories that are "mild" and would not cause great controversy if used among Muslim children.[16] It is new in the sense that children are taught to inquire or to question, to seek clarification, and most important of all to seek meaning, which is something rare

[15] See Nasr, 1987.

[16] I am referring to Matthew Lipman and the IAPC's series of books – *Elfie, Pixie, Harry, Kio & Gus, Nous, Lisa, Mark and Suki*, which I have used in conducting this Program in Malaysia.

in contemporary Muslim communities. Although these activities were common during the period of early Islam, this is no longer the case today. The program is also conducive to training children and youth to deliberate rationally on real life issues that affect them, although they should first be moved by their hearts. It trains them to think, deliberate, and act as a community in a democratic manner, which is close to the concept of *shura* (consultation) found in the *Qur'an*[17] and shown by the Prophet's Tradition, but applied today only for practical matters such as planning for an activity or event. The stories for this program need not come only from the West; appropriate narratives from within the Islamic tradition, such as those of Joha or Nasruddin Hoca, can also be used.[18]

In conducting the Philosophy for Children program, I have realized that many Muslims still respond with a sort of allergy to the word "philosophy." For this reason, I have renamed the program as the *Hikmah* (Wisdom) Program, which has a more positive ring, since the word *hikmah* comes from within the Muslim tradition. Ultimately, the aim of the program is to help children and youth be wiser, more ethical thinkers, so that they can avoid doing things that have harmful effects on themselves and the community, such as happened with September eleventh and the suicide bombings, and so that they can understand and confront Western thought by being able to articulate their own views. Most importantly, they will gain wisdom in the sense of looking and judging each action by its context and being self-corrective. As we teach these things to Muslim youth, we also hope that Western children and young people who have already been doing philosophy for a long time in high schools and universities, and now also in elementary schools, will learn to think well and have compassion for the injustices committed against the Muslim masses as a result of the folly of ignorant leaders on both sides. Ultimately, doing philosophy should be guided by the principles of justice and truth.

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[17] "Those who hearken to their Lord and establish regular prayer, *who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation*, who spend out of what We bestow on them for sustenance" (The *Qur'an*, 42, 38).

[18] Oscar Brenifer has highlighted this fourteenth-century Turkish figure, who was found to embed profound and provocative insights about man, the world, language, truth, and many other subjects beneath the comic surface of an oral tradition. See Brenifer, 2006.

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