Book Review – Islamic Philosophy; an Introduction

(Oliver Leaman)

Islamic Philosophy, by Oliver Leaman, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Kentucky, is a broad look at one of the significant contributions of Muslim thinkers to the world. Starting with Platonic, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic roots, thinkers like al-Rushd and ibn Sina consider some of the most vexing questions in life, and pave the way for the great Western thinkers from Aquinas to Descartes several centuries later.

Leaman begins with a short history of Islamic philosophy. The major thrust in Islamic philosophy in the past 200 years is to understand Islam in relation to the dominant West, but in early times the major thrust was to understand reality and to interpret previous thought, especially Greek thought, in Islamic terms. One thousand years ago Islam was confident due to its military and political successes, and could accept variegate views of itself. Today, however, Islam is on the defensive.[1]

The chapter covering "Main Controversies" discusses many issues that are familiar to any student of religion who is considering philosophy. Questions including what is religion, what is philosophy, what is reason, what is revelation and what is the relationship between them all are foundational. Concepts such as freedom, meaning, existence, and God must be characterized. The discourses on knowledge and ontology would be familiar to Descartes, and Leaman's opinion about imagination is not far from Einstein's, who said "Imagination is more important

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[1]Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK.: Polity, 2009), 12.

than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."[2]

Mysticism, involving seeking, describing and analyzing subjective, emotional experiences in religion, has attracted, puzzled and repelled religious people for millennia. Some such as the Persian Sufi Mansur Al-Hallaj (858-922) believe that they attain unity with God. Al-Hallaj believed that he was "the Truth", and he was executed for it. Others like the Arab Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of Wahhabism, are violently opposed to it. Mysticism attempts to deepen a person's faith through experience and emotion, rather than through knowledge and ritual. Ultimately almost all Muslim philosophers have been mystics.

Ethics discusses how people relate to one another. Ibn Rushd taught his students to acknowledge the authority of those who have it rather than forever questioning them. Following the authority of physicians and lawyers is an example, as is obeying those in power in the state. In the chapter on politics, Leaman describes an Islamic view of politics, in which God guides the State and the State has responsibility for the people. While liberals may believe that through technology the story of history is constant progress, Muslims hold that the "objective of political development is back into history",[3] the time when the Umma was in harmony. Another influential Islamic philosopher was al-Ghazali, the terminator of Western Islamic philosophy for many centuries.

The most useful part of *Islamic Philosophy* was where Leaman explains that for Europeans, philosophy jumps from the ancient Greeks to the European Renaissance, skipping the centuries of Muslim philosophy in between. This is unfortunate because philosophers discuss

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[2] "Albert Einstein Quotes,", accessed April 22, 2015, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/imagination_is_more_important_than_knowledge-for/260230.html.

[3]Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK.: Polity, 2009), 127.

many of the same questions time and again and can learn from each other. This applies to all men, regardless of religion or philosophy.[4] Muslim thinkers, especially in Andalusia, influenced European ones.

The final section covers modern Islam and its struggles adjusting to a world dominated by the West. The argument between those who would cling to Islam and jettison all forms of Western influence, those who would stay Islamic but adopt a secular society, and those who would abandon Islam all together, lives on. The first group is often unwilling to tolerate any challenge to the Quran, while the second feels that they can modify their understanding of the Quran to fit the new requirements for behavior. Leaman's final question, does Islam need an Enlightenment, harkens back to the European enlightenment beginning in the late 18th century. It is offensive to Muslims, implying that they are over 200 years behind the West. The author believes that Islam contains within itself the concepts that allow for an agrarian society to transition to a modern one, so an Enlgithenment in the Western sense may not be necessary.

One of Leaman's weaknesses is that he defines theology as the study of principles of a particular religion, while he views philosophy as universal.[5] A dominant Christian view is that theology is the study of God, regardless of the religion used (ie. Islamic theology, Jewish theology, etc.). Leaman also notes that philosophers use rational arguments and to eschew reason is to eschew philosophy. He elevates reason above revelation, which is itself a biased act. Finally, the author sugar-coats many of Muhammad's actions.

In sum, *Islamic Philosophy* is a useful and interesting book. A dense read, it provides much for religious and non-religious people alike to consider. I will have to go back and read Leaman's book again in the future. It is striking how philosophers of all religions answer the

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[4] Prov 27:17.

[5] Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK.: Polity, 2009), 13.

same questions, and how similar their answers tend to be. Why are there differences at all? Because all thought begins with assumptions, and Christianity has many different assumptions than anyone else. One of the biggest, and one which is supported in history, is that God became man, lived a perfect life, died, and rose from the dead.