

On the Decline of Philosophy in Medieval Islam

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Abstract

This study makes a contribution in its attempt to present a new and alternative interpretation of the demise of rationalism in Islam by stressing the organic and historical connection between rationalism and heterodoxy in the Islamic world, and in its scope and critical approach. The encounter between rationalism and heterodoxy gave rise to the prevalent view in the writings of orthodox Sunni scholars that religious and intellectual movements identified as heterodox have always sought to destroy Islam from within, through rationalism and philosophy. The joint challenge to philosophy was not directed against philosophy itself but was based on the premise that philosophy was an extraordinary intellectual tool in the hands of those who posed a threat to the Ulama's power over knowledge in Islam.

Key Words: Islam, Rationalism, Philosophy, Ulama, Ismalisim, heterodoxy

This paper addresses a theme that has long been at the heart of the debate over the history of Islam in the Middle Ages, namely, why did philosophy decline and cease to exist in the Islamic public sphere? Has philosophy actually disappeared from the mental and intellectual sphere of Islam? This study makes a contribution in its attempt to present a new and alternative interpretation of the demise of rationalism in Islam by stressing the organic and historical connection between rationalism and heterodoxy in the Islamic world, and in its scope and critical approach. The encounter between rationalism and heterodoxy gave rise to the prevalent view in the writings of orthodox Sunni scholars that religious and intellectual movements identified as heterodox have always sought to destroy Islam from within, through rationalism and philosophy. This study

will revisit and critically review conventional explanations regarding the development of rationalism within Islam, while breaking the concept down into its constitutive elements.

An examination of the theological and ideological literature of Islamic heterodox streams—from Imami Shi'ism to Ismailism—clearly indicates that rationalism never completely vanished from within Islam, despite being driven out of the formal orthodox Muslim education system, and that the anti-philosophic discourse led by orthodox scholars in fact reveals the extent of the influence of rationalism on the shaping of Islamic culture. In this sense, this study seeks to present a new and critical reading of the history of Islamic rationalism in all its forms.

To begin, it should be noted that presenting a broad account of theories and explanations on demise of philosophy in Islam would be deceptive and misleading without referring first to Gutas's thesis. Clearly, Gutas seeks to refute the hypothesis that philosophy started to fade after al-Ghazali and that there was a continuum in the Islamic thought and civilization:

Arabic philosophy did not die after al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and it was not a fringe activity frowned upon by a so-called 'orthodoxy'. It was a vigorous and largely autonomous intellectual movement that lasted a good 10 centuries—some would say it is still alive in Iran—and played a crucial role in shaping high culture both before, and especially, after Avicenna (Ibn Sina), its greatest exponent. The accompanying chart sketches in a necessarily simplified way its progress from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries.¹

¹ Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arab Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay of the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2002), p. 6.

According to Gutas, the conception about the death of philosophy in Islam should be attributed to the approaches that monopolized this field in the twentieth century: the orientalist, mystical/illuminationist, and political approaches.² In regard to the political approach, Gutas blames Leo Strauss's orientation, which considers Arabic philosophy to be invariably about the conflict between religion and philosophy. According to the orientalist reading, mystical, sensual, otherworldly, and non-rational preoccupations with religion have been historical features related to Islamic religion and philosophy. Strauss's thesis is that Arabic philosophy grew in a hostile environment but never deviated from a conformity between philosophy and religion.³

While the orientalist approach views Islamic philosophy as mystical and non-rational, following the way of orientalism, the concept of illuminationism established by Henry Corbin's theory holds that the history of philosophy and history of spirituality are inseparable and that the development of Islamic philosophy has always been linked with the religious and spiritual facts of Islam.

Gutas's definition of Islamic philosophy tends to widen its range beyond the Islamic milieu. Consequently, Islamic philosophy should include all philosophic texts written in Arabic, since the Arabic language was the cultural vehicle by which the identity and self-consciousness of all subjects in Islamic world was cultivated. Furthermore, Islamic philosophy should not be linked to Islam's religious, theological, and spiritual dimensions.⁴

² Ibid, p. 8.

³ Ibid, pp. 19-20.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 17-8.

Historical Theories on the Decline of Rationalism in Islam

The question of the demise of rationalism in medieval Islam is a critical and controversial issue, not only in Western studies of Islam, but also in the writings of modern Muslim intellectuals and scholars intent on providing a rational explanation for Western hegemony over the Islamic world. The following discussion directly and indirectly addresses various thesis and interpretations on this issue.

The eminent scholar Bernard Lewis describes comprehensive historical patterns that are actually more ideological than historical. Lewis's thesis sees Islam as an essential and unchanging material pattern, which explains the crisis in Islam in adapting to modernity, and he claims that this crisis is shaped by an essential difference between Islam and Christianity. While Christianity underwent a historical process of separating religion from the state, Islam, since its birth and by its nature, has known no such separation.⁵

This proposition of Bernard Lewis cannot provide a cogent rule for construing the Ulamas' alliance against philosophy. In his book *What Went Wrong*, Lewis presents a more ideological than historical reading, centering on an essentialist vision which argues that the model embodied by the Messenger in person adhered to Islam as a civilization, a religion, a society and a culture from the seventh century until this day. Islam has never witnessed a split between religion and the state. Since its advent, Islam has been grounded in an interconnection between the state and religion, and between religious and political authoritative references. Hence, by virtue of this intrinsic nature, Islam could not, from the time of its existence, accept philosophy. In the modern age, Islam has not managed to internalize value concepts emanating from the Western

⁵ Jean-Philippe Platteau, "Religion, Politics and development Lesson from the lands of Islam" *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 68 (2008), p. 333.

civilization, such as liberalism, human rights, the status of women, civil society, elected government, individualism, cultural pluralism, and so forth.

Lewis theorizes that Islam is a genuine obstacle to development and that it differs radically from Christianity. In other words, religion is not necessarily an obstacle to development, but in the specific case of Islam, it is indeed a structural obstacle. Lewis' argument rests on the contention that, in contrast to Christianity, the separation between politics and religion has never really occurred in the Islamic world. The reason for this lack of separation relates to the unique historical development of Islam: the Prophet Muhammad was not only a religious leader and a man of prophetic status, but also a leader who merged religion and politics.⁶

By the same logic, there is no such thing as a laity in the lands of Islam:

The idea that any group of persons, any kind of activity, or any part of human life is in any sense outside the scope of religious law and jurisdiction is alien to Muslim thought. There is, for example, no distinction between canon law and civil law, between the law of the church and the law of the state, which is crucial in Christian history. There is only a single law, the *shari'a*, accepted by Muslims as of divine origin and regulating all aspects of human life: civil, commercial, criminal, constitutional, as well as matters more specifically concerned with religion in the limited, Christian sense of the word.⁷

The hypothesis that the emergence of the Ashairi School of theology in the Islamic sphere in the tenth century contributed to the decline of philosophy and the triumph of *Ahl al-Hadith* ["the people of Hadith"] does not account for the

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London: Phoenix, 2002), p. 110.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 111.

disappearance of philosophy in Islam, for several reasons.⁸ The interval resulting from the conflict between Mu'tazila (a rationalist school of Islamic theology) and its rivals cannot be introduced as evidence for a universal historical interpretation of Ulama opposition to philosophy. Mu'tazila was never a philosophical approach in the abstract sense of the word, and Ash'arism should be positioned in the same context.⁹ The Ash'arite school of thought did not bring an end to philosophical production in Islam. Philosophical conceptions, practices and approaches were maintained even after Ash'arism came into existence, legitimized and adopted by the Seljuk State. In addition, prominent figures of Ash'arism, most notably al-Baqilani, al-Ghazali, and Taj al-Din al-Subki, among others, continued to use logic as a key philosophical tool. The tenth century also saw the emergence of the Shiite Mu'tazila which, in the eyes of Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, became an institutionalized cultural phenomenon under the reign of the Buyid dynasty.

A comprehensive study by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Sabine Schmidtke provides a detailed survey of what they call "rational theology" in the medieval world of Islam, from the eighth century to the fifteenth century. Although schools of Mu'tazili thought declined in Islam Sunni and finally disappeared in the fourteenth century, their influence remained strong in Shi'ite

⁸ George Makdisi, "The Significance of the Sunni Schools of Law in Islamic Religious History" *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 10 (1979), pp. 5-6.

⁹ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Sabine Schmidtke, "Rationalisme et theologie dans le monde musulman medieval" *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, Tome 226 (2009), pp. 615-6; George Makdisi, "Asha'ri and the Asharites in Islamic Religious History" *Studia Islamica*, 17 (1962), pp. 37-80, 18 (1963), pp. 19-39.

Islam throughout the medieval period.¹⁰ Mu'tazilism never disappeared from the intellectual and cultural scene of Islam, even after the disappearance of Mu'tazili thinkers. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, the absorption of Mu'tazilim's by duodecimal Shi'ism accelerated and intensified throughout medieval Islam and has continued until today.¹¹

The prevalent theory in this field attributes the suppression of rationalism within medieval Islam to political changes in the Islamic world after the emergence of the rule of an ethnically Turkish military elite in the eleventh century C.E. This circumstance created a situation in which Islam was the only common denominator between the ruling elite and its subjects.

This development occurring simultaneously with the political and cultural rise of the Shi'ite movement in the tenth century, which many Western Orientalists refer to as the "Shi'ite century." The new rulers sought to legitimize their regime by strengthening the status of the Ulama in the state on the one hand and by establishing *madrasas* for teaching Islamic law on the other. This trend was particularly prevalent in countries ruled by Shi'ite dynasties—such as Iraq, and later, Egypt and Bilad al-Sham. According to George Makdisi, the emergence of the *madrasa* and its establishment as the dominant form of higher education contributed decisively to the victory of religious tradition over rationalism within Islam. While Baghdad—the political and cultural capital of medieval Muslim civilization—served as the centre of *dar al-Hikma* ("the house of wisdom") in the ninth century and *dar al-Ilm* ("the house of science") in the

¹⁰ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Sabine Schmidtke, "Rationalisme et theologie dans le monde musulman medieval" *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, Tome 226 (2009), pp. 615-6.

¹¹ For further details, see: Mohammad Ali-Amir Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* (New York: State University of New York, 1994).

tenth century, in the twelfth century it became the centre of *dar al-hadith* and *al-Quran*. The desire to return its birthright to Sunnite orthodoxy led to the removal of the rational scientists and philosophers from the only formal educational framework in the Islamic world—the *madrasa*.¹²

First, the *madrasa* did not come into existence as part of a project against philosophy but was created in the context of developing an appropriate methodology for teaching *Fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence]. It mainly contributed to institutionalizing the relationship between the ruler and the Ulama. Second, Islamic history saw the emergence of innumerable schools of thought that parted with the generally recognized, inherited tradition of limiting cultural activity to the field of Islamic jurisprudence. One of these was the Mustansiriya Madrasah, which Awad and Jawad considered the first university in the Arab Islamic world.¹³ Teaching Islamic *fiqh* according to the four canonical schools was only one aspect of educational activity at the Mustansariyya. This *madrasa* was known for its great library, which contained 60,000 volumes, and its teaching hospital.¹⁴ Third, the support provided by the state in Islam to the school since the tenth century was not underpinned by a resistance to philosophy, but was

¹² George Makdisi, "Law and traditionalism in the institutions of learning of Medieval Islam" in G..E. Grunebaum (ed.), *Theology and Law in Islam* (Wiesbaden, 1971), pp. 75-88.

¹³ Kurkis Awad and Mustafa Jawad, *al-Madrasa al-Mustansariyya: Awal Jamia fi al-Alamin al-Arabi wa al-Islami* (Beirut: Dar al-Warraq Lil-Tiba'a wa al-Nashir), pp. 13-15.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 32-51; Alaa al-Din Sadiq al-Araji, *Ishkaliyat al-Tarbiyya wa al-Ta'lim wa Iadat Intaj alTakhalluf fo al-Watan al-Arabi* (3th Edition, London: el-Kutub, 2018), pp. 71-72.

tailored to seek and establish legitimacy against the background of reshaping the relationship between the ruler and the Ulama.¹⁵

In this vein, a reservation should be voiced against the hypothesis put forward by the leading scholar, George Makdisi, who argues that the fact that this school laid the foundation for adherents of the Quran and Hadith created a horizontal rift between *'Aql* (Reasoning) and *Naql* (Tradition) approaches. The matter has taken on a clear institutional dimension. Therefore, philosophy continued to flourish in informal cultural circles. However, since their inception, and by their very definition, Batini [esoteric] sects in Islam constituted a non-institutional case, and they managed to assimilate many components of philosophy as tools for building their own religious system. This was interpreted by the Ulama as an attempt to undermine their power of over knowledge.

The *madrasa* was not set up to wage a war against philosophy or to exclude philosophy. Moreover, scholars who were not affiliated with *madrasas* also came out against philosophy. The struggle against philosophy was launched by the Ulama, as an institution of religious knowledge and authority in Islam, against movements perceived by them as intellectual threats and challenges that presented themselves as an alternative to the Sharia' model of knowledge represented by the Ulama.¹⁶

On the Ulama's Fear of Rational Philosophy

Al-Ghazali's stance against philosophy and Batini sects in Islam leaves no doubt about the organic link between the Ulamas' alliance against philosophy and what was understood as a complicit interconnection between philosophy and Batini

¹⁵ George Makdisi, "The Sunni Revival" in: George Makdisi (ed.), *History and Politics in Eleventh- Century Baghdad* (Various, 1990), pp. 155-168.

¹⁶ Ibid.

sects in Islam.¹⁷ The incoherence of the philosophers reflects a natural continuum of the scandals of Batiniyya, because they used philosophy as a means of proposing an alternative epistemic-intellectual model to Islam, which would replace the static, exoteric institutional model put forward by the Ulama. For the Ulama, philosophy was a source of fear and doubt.

The dialectical connection between al-Ghazali's polemical arguments against theological and conceptual doctrines of heterodoxism in Islam and his position against philosophy demonstrate logically that he was attacking what Islamic heterodoxism saw as the instrumental functions of philosophy, rather than philosophical texts *per se*. Goldziher's thesis on al-Ghazali's motives for writing the essay "Fadaih al-Batiniyya" provides additional support for our thesis, namely, that it was ideologically directed against the Fatimid empire and the secret propaganda network of Islamilism. Nevertheless, the polemic was not part of a political debate, but an intellectual essay in the ideological and intellectual debate against Ismailism and Fatimidism. Ghazali was driven by the exacerbation of Ismaili propaganda and incitement against the Abbasid caliph, al-Mustaghhir.¹⁸

However, a significant part of al-Ghazali's essay was no different from the common polemics of Sunni orthodoxy against the heterodoxism that led to charges of heresy (*Takfir*). Hence, Ghazali's polemic is more offensive and innovative in its arguing against the Ta'lim doctrine.¹⁹ Ta'lim put forward a

¹⁷ To learn about al-Ghazali's thoughts and literary work, see: M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh, 1963); Macdonald Duncan, "The Life of al-Ghazali" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 20 (1899), pp. 71-132.

¹⁸ Ignac Goldziher, *Streitschrift des Ghazali gegen die Batiniya Sekte* (Leiden, Brill, 1916), pp. 22-24.

¹⁹ Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali, *Fadaih al-Batiniyya* (Cairo: Al-Dar al-Qawmiyya Lil-Tibaa wa al-Nashir, 1964), pp. 73-131.

model of authority in respect to knowledge and legality, which in fact challenged the very foundations of the authority borne by the Ulama class. The Ta'lim doctrine, in fact, questioned the Ulama's authority over knowledge and religious wisdom and proposed an alternative conception of infallible authority, which, through the figure of the Imam, persisted through post-prophetic history. The Ismaili conception, recognizing and pledging allegiance to the living person of the Imam, stands in un-bridgeable contrast to the orthodox model, which turns to the past (the Prophet) for sources of authority.²⁰

Al-Ghazali comes out against connections between the philosophic reasoning of religious knowledge and the theological conception of the Imamate. At first, he describes the philosophical sophistication of al-Batiniyya's machine of propaganda (*al-Dawa*):

As for the cause of men's submission to them [the Batiniyya] in some countries of the earth, they divulge this matter only to some of those who answer their call, and they advise the propagandist and say to him: "Beware of following the same way with all: for not everyone who can accept these doctrines can put up with 'stripping' and 'skinning,' nor can everyone who can stand 'stripping' stand 'skinning'; so let the propagandist speak to men in accordance with the capacity of their minds." This, then, is the reason for the attachment and [ready] circulation of these artifices.²¹

Although al-Ghazali concentrates on four aspect in the Ismaili-Batiniyya's doctrine (the essence of divinity and metaphysics, prophetic missions, the

²⁰ Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London: Institute of Ismaili Studies and I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 26.

²¹ Al-Ghazali, *Fadaih al-Batiniyya*, p. 33, as translated by McCarthy. <https://www.ghazali.org/works/bati.htm>

Imamate, and the gathering and resurrection), he leaves no room for doubt that his main concern is the al-Batiniyya school, which refuted the Sharia. "This is the beginning [basis, starting point] of their propaganda. Then, in the end they present [produce] what contradicts the Law. And it is as though this is their ultimate aim."²²

Presenting al-Batiniyya as the antithesis of normative Sharia confirms his fear that al-Batiniyya's constitutes an alternative to the knowledge authority in Islam. Hence, he concludes that:

On their belief concerning legal prescriptions what is transmitted from them is absolute licentiousness [libertinism, license], and the lifting of the barrier, and the deeming forbidden things lawful and licit, and the rejection of the [religious] Laws. However, they will all of them deny that when it is ascribed to them. What is authentic of their belief about it is simply that they say: There must be obedience [submission] to the Law regarding its ordinances [injunctions] according to the detail set forth by the Imam, without following al-Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa and others. That is incumbent on men and those who respond [to the propaganda] until they obtain the rank of perfection in the sciences. Then, when they comprehend through the Imam the real natures [realities] of things and become aware [informed] [p. 47] of the "interiors"[inner meanings] of these "exteriors" [literal texts] these fetters are loosed from them and the action-oriented injunctions fall away from them. For the aim of the acts of the members is to alert the mind that it may undertake the quest for knowledge. So when one has obtained it, he is ready for the maximum happiness, and the enjoining of the members drops from him. Indeed, the enjoining of the members

²² Ibid, p. 37.

is with respect to him who by his ignorance, is analogous to asses which can be trained only by hard labours.

But the intelligent and those who perceive [grasp] realities are higher in rank than that. This is a kind of seduction [enticement] very effective with the intelligent. Their purpose is to destroy the precepts of the Law. But they try to deceive each weak man by a way [method] which allures him and suits him."²³

The rejection of philosophy was inherently connected to the intellectual machine by which al-Batiniyya tried to promote its destructive principles—what was that machine if not philosophy?:

You have reported their doctrines, but you have not mentioned how to refute them: what is the reason for this? We say: What we have reported from them is divided into matters which can be explained in a way we do not reject and into what the Law enjoins is to be rejected. And what is to be rejected is the doctrine of the Dualists and the Philosophers. Refuting them on that would be a lengthy affair. But that is not one of the things peculiar to their doctrine so that we should busy ourselves with it. But we shall refute them simply regarding what is peculiar to their doctrine, viz. the invalidation of reasoning [*ra'y*], and the affirmation of *ta'lim* [instruction] by the Infallible Imam.²⁴

During his period, when political circumstances prevailed in the eleventh-century Saljuq-Fatimid struggle over hegemony, Ismailism presented an absolute threat to Sunni orthodoxism on intellectual, political and doctrinal levels. Therefore, placing al-Ghazali's *Fadaih* within the intellectual, rhetorical, and historical context, it is obvious that realpolitik considerations motivated him

²³ Ibid, pp. 46-7.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 47.

to claim political hegemony for Sunnism. By the same token, the main motivation was probably concern for the Ulama's position within society. Faced with heterodoxy through philosophy and Ta'lim, the Ulama's credibility and authority were at stake. For al-Ghazali, as well as for many other of his colleagues, heterodoxy based on philosophy and Ta'lim presented a real and perilous alternative to the Ulama's authority and form of knowledge.²⁵

The fair-minded, coherent and balanced account provided by al-Maqrizi on the Ismaili Dawa'a system operating under the auspices of the Fatimid Empire might clarify the Ulama's sources of concern. The Dawa'a system consists of a hierarchy made up of nine echelons; all are connected and arranged from the simplest to the most complicated. Each echelon is related to a certain aspect of Ismaili doctrine, the most significant and relevant to our study being the four upper echelons,²⁶ which are focused on the philosophic and esoteric understanding and interpretation of Islam. The sixth echelon is dedicated to the esoteric interpretation of the five pillars; however, the five pillars were divorced from their material and religious aspects and interpreted in terms of moral principles for general polity. After internalizing this way of conceptualizing the pillars, the propagator should teach the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras. The seventh echelon, based on its predecessor, attends to the Ismaili conception of the cosmos, which is composed of the upper world and which contains uncreated spiritual beings; the lower world originates from the first cause. Consequently, the eighth echelon involves the faintest Ismaili conception of the Universal Intellect, which is the first originated being, called al-Sabiq and al-Awwal (the Preceder, or the First). The Universal Intellect is eternal,

²⁵ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁶ Ahmad Bin Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Mawaiz wa al-Itibar Bi-Dhikr al-Khutat wa al-Athar* (Beirut: Dar Sadir), vol. I, pp. 391.

motionless, and perfect, and from it, and through emanation, the universal soul called al-Tali or al-Thani (the Follower or the Second) proceeds.²⁷ By reaching the ninth and the highest echelon, the propagator will expose newcomers to the Ismaili doctrine, which places philosophy above religion, since religions and prophets are destined for ordinary people, while philosophers have been the real prophets of the wisdom, destined for the upper and selected class.²⁸ This elevation of philosophy for the upper classes and lowering of religion for the masses would lead to the deposing of the Ulama as the educated class and religious instructors of the masses. Moreover, privileging philosophy above religion would intellectually undermine the Ulama as the authority over knowledge.

Although al-Baqilani's polemical writing against philosophy and heterodoxy has not come into our hands, we learn about it from later writers who mention it. The philosophical conception against which the polemic was directed was absolute dualism, or the division between essence and entity/appearance.²⁹ The philosophical logic of dualism, which divides existence into two countering poles or states, stands in contradiction to the one-dimensional and monolithic model of authority and knowledge espoused by the Ulama. The logic of dualism between essence and entity stands in logical contradiction to a unitary, stated, and monolithic model of knowledge and authority like that of the Ulama.

For a long time, the Batiniyya's intellectual esoteric interpretive model, which transcends the *Zāhir* (exotericism), has been seen as an attempt to

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 391-395.

²⁸ Ibid, 395-6.

²⁹ Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, *Naqd al-Mantiq* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, 1951), p. 196.

undermine Islam from within. Certainly, scholastic and intellectual figures as significant as al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Baqillani, and others were fully aware that Batiniyya [esotericism] was, by definition, a different epistemic model. However, fear of this alternative model would lead the de-legitimation of Batiniyya and all that it stands for. This fact is made absolutely clear in *Bughyat al-Murtād [The Goal of the Explorer]*, a book of the Hanbali Shaykh al-Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah, who unleashes his wrath upon Batiniyya and the Qarmatians, considering that any attempt to combine philosophy and Islam is doomed to fail. Ibn Taymiyyah attacks all attempts to draw a link between Islam and philosophy, including attempts by al-Kindi, the Brethren of Purity, Avicenna, and Averroes. Ibn Taymiyyah sets forth five formal reasons to undermine the idea that a homogeneity between the philosophical reason and Islam can be established: (1) the Hadith of the Prophet, (2) the writings of al-Ghazal, (3) the fact that the word '*Aql* (Reason) is not mentioned in the Quran, (4) a refutation of the statement that the Prime Reason released all that is beneath it, and (5) the idea that reason is an essence that does not exist *per se*.³⁰

The persecution campaign that targeted the followers and students of Muhammad Ibn Masarra, a Sufi and philosopher in Andalusia, can be seen in the same context. According to Sarah Stroumsa, the followers of Ibn Masarra were persecuted by the caliphs of Andalusia, mainly Abd al-Rahman III. The campaign was further pursued under the reign of his successor from the tenth century onwards. In Andalusia, the state was of the view that Ibn Masarra and his philosophical project were a natural extension of the Fatimid dynasty and

³⁰ Shaykh al-Islam, Ahmad Bin Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Bughyat al-Murtad fi al-Rad Ala al-Mutafalsifa wa al-Qaramitta wa al-Batiniyya, Ahl al-Ilhad al-Qailin Bi- al-Hulul wa al-Itihad* (Third Edition, Al-Madina al-Munawara: Maktabat al-Ulum wa al-Hikam, 2001), pp. 62-101.

Ismaili movement, for which Platonism provided the intellectual foundation. According to historical sources, the Andalusian state continued to persecute the followers of Ibn Masarra, forcing them to repent, and to burn their books.³¹

Al-Baqilani was a leading Ash'arite scholar of 'Ilm al-Kalam (Islamic theology). He was well-versed in the debates held by the Buyid ruler A'dud al-Dawla (died 983). Al-Baqilani addresses his book *Kitāb al-tamhīd* to the adherents of incarnation and anthropomorphism—the Qadariya, Mu'tazila, Rafida, and Kharijites—in order to clarify the dispute between the Righteous and all these schisms and sects.

In this context, Al-Baghdadi holds that Batiniyya used philosophy as an intellectual, instrumental tool to deconstruct monotheistic-apostolic religions, rather than Islam alone. In *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq (Moslem Schisms and Sects)*, he writes:

Based on the Batiniyya sect, it is true for me that they are Dahriyah infidels [*zanadiqah*]. They contend that the world is eternal and deny all the prophets and faiths because they incline to legalise all that is favoured by natural disposition.³²

The evidence that they are such as I mentioned can be found in their book *Al-Siyasah wa al-Balagh al-Akid wa al-Namous al-A'tham (Politics, Affirmative Declaration and the Greatest Code)*. In a letter from Ubaidullah Ibn al-Husain al-Qayrawani to Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan ibn Sa'id al-Jannabi, the former advises:

³¹ Sarah Stoumsa, "Ibn Masarra's Third Book" in: *Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke* (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 84; Muhammad Abdallah Anan, *Dawlat al-Islam fi al-Andalus* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1997), pp. 432-3.

³² Al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq wa Bayan al-Firqa al-Najiyya Minhum* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sinna), p. 256.

Preach people by endearing them to what they favour. Subsume every one of them into the delusion that you are one of them. Reveal the secret to those of whom you discern rationality. If you win the philosopher, keep him. For in the philosophers we trust. They and we are united to repudiate the laws of the prophets, and to state that the world is eternal, if it were not for some of them who oppose us and say that the world has a disposer, whom we do not know.³³

Al-Sahroudi directs his religious discourse against all the symbols of philosophy and Batiniyya in Islam. He states:

It is deeply disastrous and seditious that a people who concealed atheism and disguised in the garments of the religion showed they were members of the nation, intermingled with the people of Islam, studied the sciences of philosophers and Dahiryah, and claimed mastery. They caused some learners to slip, claiming that their argument is for the purpose of knowledge and wisdom, so they corrupted hearts that were serene, peaceful and intrinsically affable. They disturbed their quietude and brought them to the adversities of sins. They hid under the shield of Islam, planted the seeds of evil, and targeted the religion in a hopeless struggle. They are the generation and the tribe of Satan.³⁴

The only reference to Greek philosophy made by al-Dhahabi is the term “ill-fated wisdom.”³⁵ Such a statement by a prestigious scholar and prolific

³³Ibid.

³⁴Shihab al-Din Umar Bin Muhammad al-Sahrudi, *Kashf Fadaih al-Yunaniyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 1999), p. 24.

³⁵Shams al-Din Muhammad Bin Ahmad Bin Uthman al-Dhahabi, *Siyar Alam al-Nubala* (Eleventh Edition, Beirut: Muasasat al-Risala, 1996), Vol. VIII, p. 359, Vol. XXII, p. 365.

writer of stature like Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi from the fourteenth century is not an emotional caprice; it vigorously summarizes an approach towards philosophy already embraced by the Ulama establishment.

A critical reading of Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, of Islamic heritage in the light of Western modernism, leads to the same conclusion about the non-contradictory interaction between philosophy and Islam as a religious system. Al-Jabiri asserts what we reiterate here, namely, that Hermetic religious philosophy was used ideologically by the Ismaili philosophers, clearly involving what Al-Jabiri calls “resigned reason” in this philosophy-ideology of Ismailism³⁶

Additionally, Al-Jabiri is in agreement with the perception that Ismailism ultimately attempted to present a different model of Islam. This model places philosophy, together with its tools and postulations, in the same category as the Noble Quran, through what Al-Jabiri calls a special understanding that views the Quranic rhetorical devices as *Zāhir* [exotericism] undergirded by *Bātin* [esotericism].

According to al-Jabiri, the combination of heterodoxism with philosophy explains the Ulama's hostile attitude towards philosophy:

Indeed, both implications and systems have overlapped. One has been put in the same category of the other, or one has been construed by means of the other. The Ismaili philosophy did not stand against Islam. Rather, it presented a peculiar understanding of Islam, viewing the Quranic rhetorical devices as *Zāhir* [manifest] underlain by *Bātin* [interior]. However, the implication of the *Bātin*, which is presented by the Ismaili philosophy, could have not been inferred without a broad,

³⁶ Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, Takwin al-Aql al-Arabi (9th Edition, Beirut: Markiz Dirasat al-Wihda al-Arabiyya, 2009), pp. 206-7.

and a very broad, use of the Hermetic religious philosophy. The Ismaili philosophers have transferred the Quranic discourse – by way of the *Bātini* interpretation – from one pragmatic field to another: from the rhetoric understanding of Arabic, which was approved by the *Salaf* [ancestors] in the words of the adherents of Sunni Islam, to the Hermetic philosophical understanding, which could have never been attained from a mere contemplation of the Quranic text without any prior knowledge of the Hermetic literature. This is exactly what we mean by drawing a link between the Ismaili and Hermetic philosophies.³⁷

This approach is also exemplified in the writings of contemporary intellectuals. Al-Jabiri, for example, divides the sciences with an Islamic heritage into three categories:

1. Religious reason
2. Independent reason (Shi'ism, Ismalisim, and al-Batiniyya)
3. Rational reason—the exact and experimental sciences.

In his view, the religious reason espoused by orthodoxy and the independent reason of the anti-establishment Shi'ite-Batinitic movements are at odds. The latter appealed to the cultural and philosophical heritage of Persian-Zoroastrianism, Neo-Platonism, and Israelism in order to challenge and undermine the central political authority in Islam—identified with Orthodoxy—and the Ulama countered them by adopting religious reason as a formal ideology.³⁸

We should not rule out that al-Jabiri's theorizing could be seen in an apologetic context of explaining the intellectual crisis of modern Arab culture.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 213.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 134-185.

Still, what is new in al-Jabiri's theory is the important argument that there was no contradiction between Islam and philosophy taken as two intellectual and moral entities. Instead, it was a contradiction and confrontation between philosophy and orthodox Islam, as elaborated by the Ulama class.

Concluding Remarks

This analysis leads to the conclusion that philosophy and reason never disappeared from Islam in its broad sense. Fundamentalism triumphed over traditionalism. Batini sects also assimilated the tenets of philosophy. This assimilation generated a distinct aversion in the Ulama as an institution, which viewed philosophy as a lethal intellectual tool and a weapon in the hands of those who were attempting to theorize a new Islamic epistemic model premised on *'Aql* [reason], not situated side by side with the scripture, but involved in the interpretation of the scripture *per se*. It was also a weapon in the hands of those viewed as attempting to undermine the Ulama's power over knowledge. It is no wonder that a countermovement has decontextualized philosophy from the legitimization of epistemology in Islam.

In a certain sense, heterodoxism introduced an anti-thesis to Sharia in orthodox Islam. By the same token, its theoreticians and propagators were seen as promulgating an alternative model challenging that of the Ulama class in Islam. Using Gematria, philosophical tools and conceptions, in addition to cosmological foundations, would definitely lead to antinomianism and allegorical interpretations of the text.³⁹ If there was a threat about which the Ulama were concerned, it was indeed antinomianism and elimination of the Sharia, the epistemological foundation of the Ulama's authority in religion and society.

³⁹ Al-Masudi, *Kitab al-Tanbih wa al-Ashraf* (Lieden: Brill, 1893), pp. 395-6.

This paper addresses a theme that has long been at the heart of the debate over the history of Islam in the Middle Ages. Namely, why has philosophy declined or ceased to exist in the Islamic public sphere? Has it, in fact, disappeared from the mental and intellectual sphere of Islam? It should be borne in mind that these questions can be posed in the spirit of self-criticism, as is the case in the writings of prominent figures in the movement of Islamic modernism. They can also be put forth as an overt or covert attack on Islamic civilization. Against this background, this discussion attempts to provide a new historical reading and a new interpretation that draws a link between developments in the status of philosophy on one hand, and internal cultural and religious dynamism in Islam on the other. This idea is premised on the hypothesis that philosophy has ceased to exist, and that the institution of Ulama [scholars] opposed it; they saw it as a tool used by the Batini Shiites, first and foremost the Ismaili sect, to produce their own doctrines, as well as to propose an alternative system of knowledge to the orthodox- institutionalized Islam, from which the religious and social power of Ulama stemmed. Therefore, the joint challenge to philosophy was not directed against philosophy itself but was based on the premise that philosophy was an extraordinary intellectual tool in the hands of those who posed a threat to the Ulamas' power over knowledge in Islam.