

### Book Review

## The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe

*Charles E. Butterworth and Blake A. Kessel, eds. New York: E. J. Brill, 1994, 149 pp.*

During the first three decades of this century, a lively debate emerged in western academic circles regarding the extent of the Arab-Islamic influence on western civilization. Certain scholars rejected the idea that the West had been influenced in any significant manner by the classical Arab-Islamic civilization (ninth to twelfth centuries CE). Barnes, in *The Intellectual History of Mankind*, argues that there is nothing in Islamic teachings or history that encouraged the pursuit of learning and scholarship. Thus, he claimed, one cannot speak of any "Islamic contribution" to western civilization. Sevier, in his *The Psychology of the Mussalman*, goes further and argues that one cannot even speak of an "Arab" civilization, because all of the knowledge and scholarship produced in the classical age of Islam

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<sup>7</sup> Preface, p. xx.

<sup>8</sup> Particularly delightful is the author's discussion of Āmidī's definition of *wujūb* ... footnote 25, p. 99, in which he gives his own version, adding: "Amidī would probably not have been unhappy with the rephrasing of his Muntaha definition as al-wujūbu ...."

were due to Syrian, Jewish, Hindu, and Persian efforts. It naturally follows that all talk of any Arab influence on the West is superfluous.

Other scholars presented counterarguments and took the position that the Arab-Islamic influence on western civilization was very significant. Briffault, in *The Making of Humanity*, credits classical Islamic scholarship with producing the intellectual concepts and methods that were the indispensable preludes to the European renaissance. Sarton, in his *Introduction to the History of Science*, argues that the impact of Hindu and Chinese cultures on the West can be totally disregarded without seriously impairing one's ability to understand the post-medieval progress of the West. But if the Arab-Islamic impact were to be discounted, then the story of this progress would become confused and unintelligible.

More than fifty years have passed since these scholars engaged in this debate. With the passage of time, scholarship in this field has produced a wealth of new data, which has led to a better understanding of the issues involved. At this point, it can be said with a great deal of confidence that the position of Barnes and Sevier is not only untenable, but borders on the fantastic. Two works alone, Makdisi's *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* and Watt's *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* present enough evidence to highlight the significant Islamic influence upon the West. Both of these scholars present examples of new ideas and institutions that emerged in the West, after a prolonged contact with the Muslim world, for which no indigenous antecedents can be found. The presence of scholastic philosophy and colleges in medieval Europe, to give two prominent examples, can be explained satisfactorily only if one takes into account direct Islamic influences on the West. The issue is no longer whether or not there was any significant Arab-Islamic impact on western civilization—it is a question of how profound this influence really was.

*The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe* is a collection of ten papers dealing with the status of Arabic philosophy as an academic discipline in leading European universities. As the contributors and the editors all are of the opinion that the Islamic influence on the West has been quite significant, this issue is not of central concern. The essays are more concerned with discovering the various circumstances under which Arab philosophy came to be known and studied in leading western universities. It is a valuable source book for a student interested in examining the interaction between the West and the world of Islam.

Some of the papers are especially valuable in that they deal directly with the issue of Islamic influence on western scholarship in

the medieval period. For example, "The Transmission and Reception of Arabic Philosophy in Christian Spain (Until 1200)," by J. Puig, lists seven Arab authors whose works had been translated from Arabic into Latin by 1200 CE: Ibn Iṣḥāq (fl. mid-ninth century), Ibn Luqā' (864–923), al Kindī (800–70), the Brethren of Purity (c. tenth century), al Fārābī (870–950), Ibn Sīnā' (980–1037), and al Ghazālī (1058–1111). Puig notes that European translators would often virtually copy the Arabic text they had translated, rearrange various passages and pages, and present the plagiarized work as an "original" (p. 28). Burnett, in his "The Introduction of Arabic Learning into British Schools," details the movement of Arabic learning from mainland Europe into Oxford and Cambridge. He notes that some of the leading translators of Arabic texts into Latin during the twelfth century, Adelard of Bath and Michael Scot, were Englishmen. Their efforts bore fruit in the form of introducing the "Arabic Aristotle" (p. 48) and Ibn Sīnā' to England in the closing years of the twelfth century. Burnett notes that this introduction of Arab thought into England "is bound up with the rise of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge" (p. 483).

As noted previously, the major issue with which *The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe* is concerned is the various channels by which Arab thought came to be known and studied in western universities. In this regard, some of the papers in the book read like the biographies of prominent European Arabists and Islamists. From reading these particular chapters, it becomes clear that one cannot separate the introduction of Arabic philosophy into certain universities from the personal histories of certain individuals, because it is largely through the efforts of these hardy souls that Arab philosophy and Arabic studies were introduced into certain prominent universities.

The paper by Druart, "Arabic Philosophy and the Université Catholique de Louvain" is a case in point. Even though the university was founded in 1425, it was only in 1969 that a Center for Arabic Philosophy was established in Louvain, and a bachelor's degree in Arabic philosophy offered. Druart credits this achievement largely to the efforts of Simone Van Riet. He notes that, during the intervening five centuries, others had also made valiant attempts to get Arabic studies included as part of the curriculum at the Université de Louvain but had failed. In recounting these earlier failures, Druart chronicles the efforts of Nicolaus Clenardus (1492–1542). Fired by missionary zeal, Clenardus was frustrated by the fact that all of the Christian polemics were being written in Latin, a language virtually unknown to Muslims. Recognizing the importance of communicating

with Muslims in their own language, he set out on a pilgrimage in order to learn Arabic, because he could find no one in his native Louvain to teach him the language. He began this mission with the intention of eventually returning to the Université de Louvain to set up an institute for Arabic studies (p. 87). His quest to learn Arabic led him to Spain (1531), Portugal (1533), and eventually Fez, Morocco (1540). When he was satisfied that he had mastered the language, after an eleven year sojourn, he set out on a return trip to Louvain. But on his way back he died in Granada in 1542. With his death, the dream of establishing a program in Arabic studies also died.

It would be nearly seventy-five years before another attempt would be made to offer courses in Arabic. This time it was through the efforts of an Egyptian Christian, whose personal history convinced certain influential persons of the value of teaching oriental languages at Louvain. But this attempt also failed due to the personal fortunes, or the lack thereof, of Josephus Barbatus, who was to be entrusted with this project. Barbatus' stay at Louvain lasted for only three years (1615–17). Next in line was Jacques Forget (1852–1933). His efforts lead to the offering of a course on the history of Arabic philosophy in 1894 (canceled in 1899). Even though he became a prominent Arabist, his influence on Louvain regarding the matter of Arabic philosophy was limited. This course was revived in 1965 under the auspices of the Higher Institute of Philosophy, and the aforementioned Center for Arabic Studies was established in 1969.

Miklós Maróth, in his "The Reception of Arabic Philosophy at the University of Budapest," notes that "the cultural heritage of the Arabs was in the limelight of scholarly interest from the very beginning" (p. 101) at the university. This proved to be an ideal setting for Ignaz Goldziher, one of the most brilliant Arabists Europe has ever produced. Even though interest in and study of Arabic philosophy had been present at the University of Budapest since its founding in 1635, it was only with the arrival of Goldziher that it found a prominent place in the university. Consequently, it is not surprising that the bulk of Maróth's paper is dedicated to tracing the biographical outlines of Goldziher's life, particularly those years that preceded his arrival at Budapest as an instructor. It was during these years that he developed a passion and love for Arabic-Islamic studies, especially during the periods that he spent among Muslims in Syria and Egypt (pp. 104–5). Maróth notes the remarkable fact that Goldziher is one of the very few non-Muslims to have studied at al Azhar University in Cairo, which undoubtedly led to an intellectual and scholarly perspective on his part that was not available to other European Arabists. He credits Goldziher for breaking away from the dominant tradition of

studying Islam for purely practical—meaning missionary and/or diplomatic—purposes and argues that Goldziher's interest in Islam was rooted in his appreciation and genuine "love" of the Arabs.

For a student who is already familiar with the basic outlines of the interaction between the West and the Muslim world over the past eleven centuries, *The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe* makes excellent reading. One finds a wealth of detail that is not readily available in many other sources. In this one book, a student discovers the channels through which Arabic philosophy was introduced into eight prominent western universities. For the most part, each paper is excellently footnoted, which provides a valuable reference to other sources.

Here a word of caution is in order. For one who is not familiar with the topic, this book will prove to be very difficult reading. One finds many proper names, places, and dates compressed into each paper, a concentration that will be dizzying for those coming across certain names and places for the first time. But beyond this, Butterworth and Kessel have done a remarkable job in bringing together a set of well written papers on an important topic.

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