Tradition in Contemporary Arabic Political Discourse

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Introduction

Contemporary Arabic-Islamic political discourse can be classified under three broad group headings: the Islamists, the apologists and the 'intellectuals'.[1] Central to these groups' discourses is a disagreement about what the Arabic-Islamic (medieval) tradition stands for, and how and which of its components (religious and philosophical) are to be accorded relevance in socio-political discourse and life. In this paper, I survey a sample of views and arguments of a number of intellectuals, focusing in more details on the work of Muhammad 'Abed al-Jabiri. His work has been the subject of numerous discussions and debates by other Arab intellectuals and is also frequently cited and praised by scholars outside of the Arab intellectual scene. In my analysis, I note some of the scholarly contributions intellectuals are making in the study of the tradition; and I argue that their methods and analyses of Arabic-Islamic philosophy are driven less by scholarly-objective pursuits than by political considerations. This is not to suggest that there should exist a divide between philosophy and politics. There is, however, a strong tendency in the intellectuals' discourse to subordinate the history of and methods in philosophy to advance what they deem as solutions to contemporary political problems. Accordingly, this discourse suffers from a lack of serious scholarly credibility.

Preliminary notes

The Islamists are the proponents of Islamism, a political current that attributes ideological dimension to the religion of Islam. The 'apologists' are representative of a current that emphasises that reasoning is a form of knowledge sanctioned by Islam. Both of these currents ground their discourse in the religious foundation texts (Qur'an and Hadith). Unlike the Islamists, the apologists do not seek to bring about an Islamic political system, but they do seek to change the direction of Islamic politics, with their primary goal being to adapt Islam to modernity. In doing so, they approach the foundation texts with a contextual hermeneutical theory rather than a literal one.[2] Whereas the Islamists generally advocate a combative and

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[1] I am here adapting the classification of Ghassan Finianos: 'Islamists, apologists and free thinkers', *Islamistes, apologistes et libres penseurs*, Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002. This paper forms part of a larger project, it is elsewhere that I examine the discourses of the Islamists and the apologists.

[2] Amongst others, see for instance, Nasr Hamid Abû Zayd, *Naqd al-Khitâb al-Dînî* (A Critique of the Religious Discourse), Cairo: Sînâ lil-Nashr, 1994, pp. 94-9; see also Muhammad Shahrour, *al-Kitâb wal-Qur'ãn*, pp. 35-7; Muhammad Sa'îd al-'Ashmâwî, *Al-Islâm al-Siyâsî* (Political Islam), Cairo: Sînâ lil Nashr, 1987, pp. 7-13. On

exclusionary interpretation of Islam relying on selective qur'anic verses that they tend to interpret literally, the apologists are also selective but rely on verses that promote tolerance and justice amongst people.

The 'intellectuals' I refer to in this paper form another category.[3] In a general sense, an intellectual is anyone engaged in a scholarly pursuit. Accordingly, many thinkers in the Arab world qualify as intellectuals, including the Islamists and the apologists. However, in this paper, I deliberately use the term 'intellectual' in a restricted sense, refering only to those Arab thinkers who: (i) explore the tradition not exclusively through the lenses of the religious foundation texts; (ii) explore the tradition in the light of contemporary concerns; and (iii) designate themselves as intellectuals (*muthaqqafūn*) in these senses. These thinkers are usually academics in university posts, mostly working in the field of philosophy.

These intellectuals see themselves as engaged in the study of the past for the sake of the present. By contrast, a second major group of Arab academics see themselves as engaged in the study of the past for the sake of understanding the past. This group is commonly designated as Orientalists (without any Saidian connotations, referring to scholars in the fields of philology, intellectual history, etc..). Orientalists certainly have an impact on contemporary understandings of the tradition. But because of this focus on the past for its own sake they do not see their works as having an interventionist role in contemporary society and in this sense they are less prone than intellectuals to see themselves as competing with the discourses of the Islamists and the apologists. I recognise that there is a lot more to be said about the Orientalists (the literature on this topic is vast), but that would be another topic from the one I am addressing in this paper.

Political Relevance of the Tradition

It is common that certain customs, historical periods and figures come to be identified with or dominate a particular cultural or religious tradition. Such is, perhaps inevitably, the case with the development of most traditions and the variety of patterns they manifest themselves in. It is also inevitable that tense dynamics ensue between the minor and the dominant currents of a tradition, each appropriating to its own values a sense of righteousness and authenticity.

Complications arise, however, when tensions between conflicting intellectual currents move from a state of reasoning limited to and accommodated by differences of views to a state of reasoning by elimination. That is, when conflicting currents change from being a source of intellectual challenge to one of taxing strain when one current perceives the other current(s) as a threat to its values, and seeks to eliminate it/them as an intrinsic realisation of its own values.

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the approaches of Muslim apologists, also referred to as liberals, see Ann Elizabeth Mayer, 'Religious Law and Legal Pluralism', *Cardozo Law Review*, February/March 1991 (Westlaw- p. 1020). See also Charles Kurzman, 'Introduction', in Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
[3] I am here examining recent writings on the tradition, for a concise article that enumerates the prominent and influential writers on the subject of tradition since the 19th century, see Ahmad S. Moussalli, 'The Dialectics between the Intellectual, Culture and the State: Renaissance Experiences in the Arab World', *Encounters* 6:2 (2000), pp. 151-76.

Such dynamics characterise contemporary prevalent Islamic intellectual discourses on the subject of the Islamic *turâth* (tradition/heritage/legacy/culture), how it ought to be understood and the relevance to be accorded to it in the present. A theoretical reflection of such unaccommodating dynamics is to speak of the *turâth*, in intellectual Arabic parlance, not as a study (*baḥth*) but as a problématique (*ishkâliyya*). The practical manifestations of such dynamics are more disturbing, the list of Arab thinkers assassinated, imprisoned or forced into exile because of their interpretations of the Islamic tradition is a long one;[4] a specific interpretation of the tradition also plays a strong role in the activism of militant Islamic groups. In other words, the *turâth* in contemporary Arabic discourse does not simply imply a history of a tradition that extends to the present, but a present that seeks to shape its political and intellectual identity by connecting itself according to a particular image of the past.

Relevance of Examining the Intellectuals' discourse

Arab intellectuals present themselves as being *critically* engaged in the study of the Arabic-Islamic tradition. While they do not always agree on all issues pertaining to the study and interpretation of the tradition, they do commonly agree about the need to mount a challenge/reaction to the Islamists' interpretation of the tradition. The increasing clout the subject of the religious tradition is gathering in contemporary political discourse has led intellectuals to advocate a stronger emphasis on the philosophical component (*turâth falsafî*) of the tradition for a better understanding of the *turâth*.[5] A modern philosophical method that sheds light on Islamic Philosophy, it is argued, will counter-balance the seemingly rigid understanding of the *turâth* that is reflected in the emphasis on its religious aspects. This kind of approach, so the argument goes, would allow the *turâth* to be contemporary with the present, in such a way that its positive aspects are put to use for the purposes of contemporary aspirations.[6]

The debate on this subject is considerable in Arabic writings. There is also a growing interest outside the Arab intellectual scene, especially by scholars interested in the study of political Islam, in favour of how Arab intellectuals are analysing and interpreting the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Underlying this praise is an approval of the intellectuals' critique of the quasi-monopoly over the interpretation of the tradition by the Islamists. There is also an implicit approval that these intellectuals are bringing more emphasis not on the religious current of the tradition but on the philosophical current. And given that these intellectuals are generally teaching scholars at universities, their discourse is seen to carry an aura of credibility.

Arab Intellectuals and politics

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[4] See '"Blasphemous" Writers Hounded', *al-Qalam*, vol. 26, no. 8, August 2000, http://mandla.co.za/al-qalam/2000/August2000/blasphemous.htm, Mohammed Chaouki Zine, 'Nasr Hamid Abu Zaïd: itinéraire et affaire', http://philo.8m.com/zaiditiner.html

[5] Among others Muhammad Waqîdî, *jur'at al-Mawqif al-Falsafî* (The Courage of the Philosophical Stance), Beirut: Afrîqyâ al-Sharq, 1999, p. 9, Khâlid al-'Abûd, *Hiwâr 'ala Ard Muhâyida* (Dialogue on a Neutral Ground), Damascus: al-Ahâlî, 1997, p. 19.

[6] Waqîdî, *Hiwâr Falsafî: Qirâ'a Naqdiyya fî al-Falsafa al-'Arabiyya al-Mu'âsira* (Philosophical Dialogue: A Critical Reading of Contemporary Arabic Philosophy), Al-Dâr al-Baydâ': Dâr Tobqâl lil-Nashr, 1985, p. 105.

Any critique of the discourse of Arab intellectuals must bear in mind the political conditions within which these individuals operate. That is, these intellectuals cannot be seen and judged in the same way we identify and judge 'public intellectuals' in the West. For these intellectuals do not operate within the same 'public' space that intellectuals in the West generally enjoy. The public space that Arab intellectuals operate within is confined or at least conditioned by two issues, both of which are seen by them to be tied to political/ideological settings that feed off each other.

The first is tied to the **domestic** political culture of the Arab world, one that is characterised by the 'forbidden' (*mamnû'*), whereby all thinkers must bear in mind the implications of their discourse on their (de facto) relationship with the state. It is not an exaggeration to say that for those who live in the Arab world, the *word* is a luxury the price of which is at times paid for in blood currency. Arab intellectuals have written extensively on the relationship between the intellectual and his/her relationship to the state (*al-muthaqqaf wa-l-sulṭa*). Khalid al-Kirky, a Professor of Arabic Literature in Jordan and a former politician, rightly observes that Arab intellectuals must at all times bear in mind the implications of their works on their relationship with the state. In many instances, the intellectual finds that first and foremost it is 'expected of him to recognise the legitimacy of the state and to defend it' and that it is forbidden for him to criticise or reject its values.[7] Indeed al-Kirky is not playing with words when he states that the intellectual horizon of Arab intellectuals provides them with four options:

> To be guided by the dream option, with all its wideness, beauty, freedom and towering [features]; to be guided by the authority of the state (*al-sulṭa*) with its objects of suspicion, [on the outside] wooden or golden bridges, on the inside, its whip, prison and reality; the option [to be guided by the spirit of] the people with their aspirations and anxieties, their patience, hunger and perplexity; or to be guided by God, the Great and Exalted, by His certainty, sufism/mysticism, trust and auspiciousness. Here falls the anxiety in the souls of innovators, because the freedom of movement in Arab societies is confined, and the loaf of bread and dignity are dependent on all of these options..[8]

I should note here that al-Kirky underestimates how dangerous it is for intellectuals to consider that God is as simple an option as he suggests. Shortly before the Iraq war (2003), the Lebanese based newspaper *al-Nahar* published a piece by 'Aql al-'Awit, a Lebanese intellectual, entitled 'A Letter to God'. The gist of al-'Awit's Letter is an emotional and desperate appeal to God pleading Him to intervene and save the oppressed people of the world, including the Iraqis who were facing a critical point in their history. Al-'Awit's appeal to God was not in the form of a submissive believer's prayer to an omnipotent Being. Instead of a prayer, al-'Awit wrote God a 'letter' challenging His very existence in view of the injustice the author believes to be the norm in the world. The following excerpt reflects the overall tone of the Letter:

> If you are truly a God, act appropriate to what your divine status commands, and ask not for anything in return.

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[7] Khalid al-Kirky, 'al-Karaz al-Mansî: al-muthaqqf wa-al-sulta' (The Intellectual and the State), in *Hiwârât fî al-Fikr al-'Arabî al-Mu'âsir: al-Mashrû' al-Hadârî al-'Arabî bayna al-Turâth wa-l-Hadâtha* (Discussions in Contemporary Arabic thought: The Arabic Cultural Project between Tradition and Modernity), 2002, p. 55.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Why, O God- whether we believe in you or not- do you forfeit your divinity? Why have you become weak, cowardly and helpless?[9]

Following its publication, the office of a Sunni religious authority in Tripoli (*Dar al-Fatwa*)-Lebanon, issued a statement accusing the author of disbelief (*kufr*), demanding the Lebanese Government that he and the newspaper be referred to the court of justice for having committed a crime against the constitution. On the basis of the statement, the Prosecutor General submitted the case to court. This incident is by no means atypical of the kind of domestic pressure Arab intellectuals regularly face.

The second confining aspect that needs to be taken into account is tied to **foreign** factors. That is to what these intellectuals consider as the Western dominant/imperial approach seeking to impose a uniform/universal philosophy by virtue of its global political success. The political malaise of the Arab world is seen as part of and as a result of this Western project. In addition to this, there is also an attitude that Western writings on the subject of the Arabic-Islamic tradition should not be dissociated from the Western imperial agenda.

The restrictive domestic space plays a role in how these external political factors are perceived. Hasan Nafaa (Professor of Political Science at Cairo University) emphasises that the domestic constraints facing intellectuals feed off external ones. Arab intellectuals, he writes, are conscious of the fact that they are not simply coerced into being servants to their Arab leaders, but that their leaders are themselves subservient to external powers, the American master. Nafaa is not suggesting here that Arab leaders are actually the victims of an external conspiracy. He wants to highlight the case that Arab intellectuals do not acquire intellectual freedom by simply joining forces with the West where less constraint is imposed on freedom. In other words, the freedom preached in the West does not necessarily entail a universal freedom, rather Nafaa is of the view that Western freedom comes at the expense of the freedom of others.[10] But while I do want to emphasise the political factors surrounding Arab intellectuals especially the complex relationship between the intellectual and the Authority, such factors are not enough to ignore the unwarranted directions that some political considerations assume, at times, in the discourse of intellectuals on tradition.

Politicisation of Philosophy & Turâth: Tah 'Abd al-Rahman & Mohammad 'Abed al-Jabiri

Tah 'Abd al-Rahman

Signposts for a New Philosophy

The discourse of Tah 'Abd al-Rahman, Professor of logic and philosophy of language at the University of Rabat- Morocco, is an example of an intellectual who is engaged not in philosophy as he wants the reader to believe, but in the politicisation of philosophy. Rahman starts by considering what he deems to be the appropriate modern and new approach for a philosopher. The new approach, he believes, is one that ought to be characterised by posing

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[9] 'Aql al-'Awît, 'Risâla ilâ Allah' (A Letter to God), *al-Nahar*, 11 March 2003, p. 1.
[10] Hasan Nafaa, 'Arab intellectuals and the American "prince"', *al-Ahram Weekly*, 13-19 March, 2003 (Opinion).

the 'responsible question' (*al-su'âl al-mas'ûl*).[11] This form of question, he explains, should be understood to differ from the 'Socratic question', i.e., whereby the examination of the subject matter is sought by means of posing the question; and from the 'Kantian question', i.e., whereby the question is characterised by carrying within it a critique of the subject matter. The 'responsible question' is a 'question that asks about its [ontological] status as a question in as much as it asks about its subject matter': in Socratic parlance, it is a question that 'examines its status in the same way it examines its subject matter', in Kantian parlance, it is a 'question that critiques its status in the same way it critiques its subject matter'.[12]

In more specific terms, Rahman explains, that this new approach requires that the philosopher be conscious of his ethical role, and in that, he is a philosopher by being 'responsible' before being a 'questioner'. This also entails taking into consideration the following: 'why does one ask? About what does one ask? Whom does one ask? Why is it necessary to answer? About what is it necessary to answer? To whom is it necessary to answer?' In other words, by virtue of this 'responsibility' the 'question' gains a necessary ethical dimension.[13]

With these considerations in mind, Rahman argues that the role of the Arab philosopher is not to imitate others by engaging in the same question that they engage in. Instead, he should only pose that question that out of responsibility he should pose and out of responsibility he should answer. And this should only happen in order 'to liberate the Arabic philosophical discourse and open the horizons for innovation in it'. In doing so, the Arab philosopher must problematise two notions, (a) the notion that the philosopher's mission is to direct his intellectual energy towards the goal of achieving 'universal thought' (*al-fikr al-wâhid*) and (b) the notion that the philosopher should accept the premise of a '*fait accompli*' (*al-amr al-wâqi'*) in the political circumstances of his cultural surrounding.[14]

(a) **Universal thought**: whereas it has been customary for the philosopher to seek to bring together various forms of knowledge dispersed among various cultures, nowadays, Rahman argues, the philosopher's mission should be the opposite. His mission is not to resist differences in knowledge, but to resist the equalisation of knowledge (*al-taswiya al-thaqâfiyya*). The latter, according to Rahman, is nothing but an imposition by power of one form of knowledge, that is the knowledge of the most powerful (*thaqâfat al-aqwâ*) on all the other cultures that differ from it.[15] The premise of universal thought, Rahman opines, goes against the principle of responsibility in philosophy that gives the philosopher the mission to liberate the process of thinking. It also goes against the very process of philosophising in that it ultimately moves towards an intellectual environment characterised by a consensus of ideas, whereas philosophising should be characterised by disagreement.[16]

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[11] Note that Rahman is here playing on the common ontological properties of the two terms, noting that in Arabic 'question' (*su'âl*) and responsible (*mas'ûl*) derive from the same root (*sa'al*). He is also using mas'ûl to designate two different meanings, (1) 'responsible', in the sense of carrying responsibility including that pertaining to the act of posing the question; (2) using it as the active participle of 'question', i.e., 'he who receives the question' as opposed to 'he who poses it'.

[12] Tah 'Abd al-Rahman, *al-Haqq al-'Arabî fî al-Ikhtilâf al-Falsafî* (The Arabic Right to Disagreement in Philosophy), Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqâfî al-'Arabî, 2002, p. 14. A more literal rendition of the title would be The Arabic Right to Philosophical Disagreement, but I think the former rendition is more in line with the content of the book.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-7.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

(b) **fait accompli**: While universal thought is a form of cultural hegemony, *fait accompli* is a political notion by which a political hegemony is imposed. Rahman argues that these two notions are tied together. This is so because even though philosophy can be confined by the limits of a single culture, it nevertheless remains a cultural expression, and even though philosophy is never a political expression it deals with various matters pertaining to politics. This natural link between the two means that politics (of the most powerful) can transpose its own categories and conditions on philosophy (of the less powerful), thus subjugating the latter to its own political directions and agenda and ultimately leading it to an inevitable death. In other words, whereas in philosophy there is no compulsion in anything, the notion of *fait accompli* carries within it a compulsion in accepting the reality imposed by the most powerful.[17]

The 'Universal' Philosophical Tradition

Rahman's concern over the cultural Arab expression leads him to examine what is regarded as the universal philosophical tradition and how it relates to or threatens Arabic philosophy. Universal philosophy, he argues, is nothing but a national philosophy based on the Judaic tradition that is being exploited for political purposes.[18] Judaic influence had long made its mark on universal philosophy by way of Greek philosophy,[19] it then made its way into European philosophy especially German philosophy ultimately leading to the judaisation (*tahwîd*) of universal philosophy.[20] It was Heidegger who, with his ontological philosophy, sought to go back to the pre-Platonic philosophers to rectify this inappropriate Judeo-Christian heritage on what is meant to be universal philosophy. Heidegger soon came under severe criticism and did not see his project fulfilled. What we have then, so Rahman argues, is nothing but a Judaic heritage that is exploited for political purposes.[21] When the Arab philosopher takes part in this universal philosophy, he is being unconsciously led to think in a manner that his 'enemy' wants him to think and that will eventually lead him to his death.[22] The need for a distinct Arabic philosophy is therefore not an intellectual luxury but a means for survival. This kind of analysis is not common to Arab intellectuals, and the book in which Rahman advances these views, *The Arabic Right to Disagreement in Philosophy* is a recent publication (2002) that I am yet to find reactions to.

Amongst the intellectuals with whose works I am familiar, Rahman's approach is quite unique. It stems from a reaction to existing studies that examine the tradition from what he regards as a fragmentary perspective. In his other writings, he outlines that his project aims to offer a perspective that examines the tradition as a whole, using tools that are indigenous (*ma'sûla*) to the tradition and ultimately leading to establishing what is authentic (*al-ma'ârif al-asliyya*) as distinct from what is transmitted knowledge (*al-ma'ârif al-manqûla*) in the tradition.[23] But his method is one-sided and narrow and does not allow for the notion of knowledge acculturation. Leibnitz (1646-1716), for example, Rahman notes, was heavily influenced by the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204), but he fails to note what is

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[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 18-9.
[18] *Ibid.* p. 65.
[19] Al-Rahman, *al-Haqq al-'Arabî..*, p. 61.
[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-64.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[23] Tah 'Abd al-Rahman, *Tajdîd al-Manhaj fî Taqwîm al-Turâth* (Renewing the Method in Evaluating the Tradition), Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqâfî al-'Arabî, n.d. (date post-1993), pp. 12-3.

inescapably evident in Maimonides writings that he himself was heavily influenced by the Muslim philosophers and theologians. In fact, it has been argued by Taha Hussein that there exist many similarities between the teachings of the Mu'tazilites, the early Muslim theologians, and Leibnitz.[24]

Whereas other intellectuals go around the religious component of the tradition and comment on it as if they are outside it, Rahman develops his argument using a (universal) philosophical method, void of any religious connotations. But to him, it goes without saying that this method is not alien to the religious tradition, because the latter he considers to be a nationalist mission and therefore is of the characteristics that make up Arab (national & cultural) philosophy. As such, his discourse and to use his own way of thinking, by natural philosophical progression, culminates in upholding the national(-religious) tradition.

It is not too difficult to critique and reject Rahman's arguments using the very premises he uses. Suffice to say that Rahman gives a priority of claim for the (local) political concerns over the (universal) pursuits in the study of philosophy and in this he himself corners philosophy in a *fait accompli* of a political order. What I am interested in doing here is not to engage in polemics, but to bring to the fore the political element that runs through this discourse. But in highlighting the political underpinning external and internal to this discourse, I am not suggesting that Rahman or other intellectuals are concealing the cultural political agenda attached to their works or that they are not conscious of it. Rahman, for example, writes of an 'enemy', grounding the Arabic philosophy he aspires towards establishing in the Israeli-Palestinian context. In the course of doing so, he reduces philosophy from the universal to the local (political), yet at the same he ends up universalising a contemporary political problem. Rahman, for instance, does not use terms indicating particularity like Zionist (*sahyûniyya*), instead he uses terms that are closer to the universal than they are to the particular, like Judaisation. The outcome of Rahman's method is not a distinct Arabic philosophy, but more of a conspiracy-philosophy theory that is meant to appeal to popular political lines, in his own terms, an 'irresponsible' answer to a problem.

Muhammad 'Abed al-Jabiri

On the Problématique of the Tradition

Jabiri, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rabat- Morocco, presents himself as an intellectual critically engaged in the study of the tradition (*mashrû' naqdî*) with the mission to accomplish an intellectual project (*mashrû' fikrî*).[25] He has written extensively (though repetitively) on the subject of the tradition, his books have generated numerous responses by other Arab intellectuals,[26] and he is perhaps the most cited and praised of all Arab intellectuals outside the Arab scene.[27]

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[24] Mentioned in Albert Hourani, 'Islamic History, Middle Eastern History, Modern History', in Malcolm H. Kerr (ed.), *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, California: Undena Publications, 1980, p. 8.

[25] M. A. al-Jâbirî, *Al-Turâth wa-l-Hadâtha* (Tradition and Modernity), Beirut: Markaz Dirâsât al-Waḥda al-'Arabiyya, 1991, pp. 8-9.

[26] Among others, Waqîdî, *Hiwâr Falsafî*; George Tarabishi, *Nazariyyat al-'Aql: Naqd Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabî (1)* (A Theory of Intellect: A Critique of the *Critique of the Arabic Intellect*), 2nd edition, Dâr al-Sâqî, 1999; *Ishkâliyyât al-'Aql al-'Arabî: Naqd Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabî (2)* (The Problématique of the Arabic Intellect: A Critique of the *Critique of Arabic Intellect (2)*), Dâr al-Sâqî, 1998; Tah 'Abd al-Rahman, *Tajdîd al-Manhaj…*

[27] Among others, Issa Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990; D. Gutas, 'The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the

Jabiri is of the view that the current state of Arab intellectual awareness of the tradition is one characterised by irrationality (*allâ'aqlâniyya*).[28] This necessitates that a new interpretation of the *turâth* is developed, one that uses a method that deconstructs the texts and allows them to be given a modern reading.[29] Jabiri's work makes an important contribution in pointing out the ideological underpinnings that are latent in the epistemological structure that makes up the history of the Arabic-Islamic tradition.

He remarks that the term *turâth* has never had more currency in Arabic thought than in the twentieth century (onward). He also notes that its early historical usage carried the meaning of inheritance,[30] and its contemporary usage adds an ideological cultural meaning to the term. Whereas the historical usage was that inheritance implied 'the disappearance of the father and the advent of his son in his place', the contemporary meaning implies 'the presence of the father in the son, the presence of the predecessor in the successor, the presence of the past in the present.'[31] It encompasses at the same time the cognitive and the ideological, such that the term *turâth* now carries the meaning of a cultural, intellectual, religious, literary and artistic legacy enveloped in some sort of an ideological empathy.[32]

The reason for this cognitive and ideological amalgam in the meaning of *turâth*, Jabiri opines, has to do with the fact that this usage is a product of the modern Arab renaissance (*nahda*) discourse (late 19th to early 20th century). Like the discourse of other reform movements, he explains, Arab renaissance discourse used *turâth* as a support mechanism in a way that by inviting a return to the roots of the tradition, it is then able to critique the present and the past and move thereafter to the future. But this return to tradition was at the same time used as a defence mechanism against the challenges and threats posed by the external Western world against the existence of the Arab nation. The coinciding of Arab renaissance with the challenges posed by the West saw the reformers' intellectual energy of 'returning' to the tradition result in a strict adherence to the past to give strength to the present, instead of it being used as a means by which that discourse can move to the future.[33]

Jabiri also makes other insightful observations that have consequences on the epistemological structure of Arabic thought. He notes that there exists a restrictive terminology in the intellectual Islamic discourse, it is manifest in the attribution of a quasi-feudal character to Islamic history and Arabic thought. Arabic history, poetry and literature, for example, are understood and analysed according to the reign of family dynasties, e.g., Umayyads, Abbassids, etc... For Jâbirî, this closed terminology and its limiting connotations reflects not so much an inconsistency in ideological choices, but indicates the absence of epistemological stability, a stability that is crucial to intellectual progress.

Historiography of Arabic Philosophy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5-25; Hisham Sharabi, 'The Scholarly Point of View: Politics, Perspective, Paradigm', in Hisham Sharabi (ed.), *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses*, London: Routledge, 1990; Finianos, *op. cit.*; Abdou Filali-Ansary, *Réformer l'Islam?*, Paris: Édition la Découverte, 2003.

[28] Jâbirî, *Al-Turâth wa-l-Hadâtha*, p. 18.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[30] Jâbirî's remark is consistent with the Arabic lexicon *Lisân al-'Arab* that says that originally the 't' in *turâth* was 'wâw', i.e., from *wirâth*, 'inheritance', putting it in the same category as other terms that share the same root and mean material inheritance. Ibn Manzûr, *Lisân al-'Arab*, Beirut: Dâr Ihyâ' al-Turâth al-'Arabî, 1999, vol. 15, p. 266.

[31] Jâbirî, *Al-Turâth wa-l-Hadâtha*, p. 24.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-3.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Jâbirî also notes the absence of an epoch of 'ancient' civilisation in the structure of the intellectual history of Arabic thought. That is to say, one talks of Arabic civilisation only with reference to medieval and contemporary eras, even though there is an *ancient* epoch that gives sense to the term 'middle' in the Middle Ages.[34] This point is of crucial significance here. Not only does this missing reference rob the Islamic tradition of perhaps the chief and most important intellectual influence of its formative and middle periods, but it also places the Islamic tradition outside (and alien to) the European and currently dominant intellectual tradition. Generally, for example, the European tradition links its high points to its classical Greco-Roman epoch and downgrades its standard of intellectual achievements in reference to its medieval epoch. The Islamic tradition, on the other hand, experienced its high points in medieval times, during which it was influenced also by the Greco-Roman tradition that is now overlooked in intellectual Islamic history.

Solutions to Problems

Jâbirî calls for a modern (*hadâthî*) understanding of the tradition to replace the prevailing 'traditional understanding of the tradition' (*al-fahm al-turâthî lil-turâth*).[35] He identifies three approaches that qualify as traditional in the sense that they over-emphasise the intellectual assets of the predecessors/forefathers (*al-salafiyya*) and that they permeate most approaches to the *turâth*, especially in reference to its philosophical component. They fall under the following headings:

1- Traditional *salafiyya*: this approach is characteristic of the religious approach. Its understanding of knowledge (*ma'rifa*) about the *turâth* is characterised by transcription (*istinsâkh*) and participation in (*inkhirâṭ*) the problematics of that which is being read (*maqrû'*) and surrendering to it.[36] As such, it places the present in a position of being encompassed by the past, instead of the other way around.

2- Orientalist *salafiyya*: there are two sides to this approach. The first is linked to imperialism, the roots of which go back to the medieval conflicts between Islam and Christianity. Arabic Islamic thought, in this approach, is labelled as the 'Semitic mind' and it implies that the Islamic religion is sterile when it comes to science and philosophy, and accordingly it restricts the scope for free thinking. The second is linked to the period of the Enlightenment during which oriental studies became an important pursuit. This he notes was driven by two goals, (1) an interest in a re-writing of intellectual European thought in a manner that would allow it a sense of unity and continuity (*waḥda wa-istimrâriyya*); (2) and making the history of European thought into a general and universal history. Those goals, Jâbirî argues, formed the framework within which all Orientalists, including Arab academics who follow this approach, were approaching the *turâth*. The Orientalist *salafiyya* shares the characteristic of the first approach in so far as conformity or subordination (*taba'iyya*) is concerned.[37]

3- Marxist *salafiyya*: this approach is explicit about its borrowed model, that being the Marxist tradition, and conscious of its subordination/conformity (*taba'iyya*) to it. What this approach is not conscious of, however, Jâbirî opines, is that its historical

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[34] Muhammad 'Âbid al-Jâbirî, *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabî (I): Takwîn al-'Aql al-'Arabî* (A Critique of Arabic Intellect (1): the Formation of Arabic Intellect), Beirut: Markaz Dirâsât al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1998, p. 43.

[35] Muhammad 'Âbid al-Jâbirî, *Al-Turâth wa-l-Hadâtha*, p. 15.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-8.

materialism (*al-mâddiyya al-târîkhiyya*) also operates tacitly within the Orientalist approach in that it is part of the same Eurocentric endeavour that seeks to universalise European thought. Another problem of this approach is that it is preoccupied with the past, in such a manner that it does not want to live its present, it just wants to go beyond it.[38]

In order for the *turâth* to play a constructive role in the present, Jâbirî proposes an epistemological rupture (*qatî'a*) from this emphasis on the predecessors (*al-salaf*), a characteristic that permeates most approaches to the *turâth*. The alternative intellectual approach he advocates involves:

1-   A structural analysis (*tahlîl bunyawî*) that approaches any thinker's work as a whole.

2-   An historical analysis (*tahlîl târîkhî*) that relates the text to its historical context.

3-   An ideological analysis that takes into account the professional stance the thinker in question assigned to himself in the intellectual domain of his time and the purpose for which he deployed his knowledge. This aspect, according to Jâbirî, should help uncover the ideological component of the text and serve as the principal means of understanding the *turâth* in a manner contemporary with itself.[39]

(Mis)Representation of the Tradition

Jabiri's discourse is underpinned by a strong commitment to Arab nationalism, but some of his analysis provides a critical and plausible insight into the dynamics behind the excessive preoccupation with tradition and the stalling of reforms in the Arab world. From this point of departure, however, he proceeds to provide an un-critical, one might say in his own parlance an 'Orientalist' analysis of the content of the tradition that does not even conform to the methodology he himself sets out.

According to Jabiri, Islam in its early stages was an ideology that 'secured secular domination' by managing to quell rival factions and sublimate them. But the advent of the Abbassid dynasty (750-1258 AD) had to confront the hostile elements by the Persian aristocracy (Persia was conquered in 637 AD). This hostility was in the form of an 'ideological offensive' that made use of the Persian religious-cultural heritage inspired by Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, and Mazdaism and was designed to discredit the religion of the Arabs and undermine the state. As a response, the Abbassids encouraged the Mu'tazilite line of theology which placed emphasis on intellect, and, despite the opposition of the jurists, they officially adopted the Mu'tazilites teachings that the Qur'an was created as the doctrine of the state. Jabiri argues that it is as a response to this political context and in order to strengthen Arab rationalism that Caliph al-Ma'mûn (813-833) commissioned the translation of Greek texts into Arabic.[40]

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[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 29; Jâbirî, *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabî(1)*, pp. 11-4. See also Muhammad Waqîdî's commentary on Jâbirî's work in, *Hiwâr Falsafî: Qirâ'a Naqdiyya fî al-Falsafa al-'Arabiyya al-Mu'âsira*, pp. 105-6. Waqidi is here summarising Jâbirî's views and presenting a critique as well. He is not so much critical of Jâbirî's position but of Jâbirî's claim that his approach is novel.

[39] Jâbirî, *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabî(1)*, p. 14; Waqîdî, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

[40] Mohammed 'Abed al-Jabri (Trans. Aziz Abbassi), *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*, Austin: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1999, pp. 49-51.

All of this gave rise to two intellectual currents, the gnostic or illuminationist current of the Persians that hides behind Shi'ites movements (e.g., Isma'ilism and Ikhwân al-Safa), and the rationalist current of the Mu'tazilites. The former joined forces with the literalist jurists and managed to stage some kind of an intellectual coup against the Mu'tazilites, leading the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861 AD) to change the religious policy and show more favour towards the jurists. But the political philosopher Abû Nasr al-Fârâbî (870-950 AD) took on the cause of rationalism, he sought to establish the '"virtuous city", a city of reason, of harmony, of fraternity and of justice in which he invested all the sciences of his era, especially the rational sciences'. He had a 'militant rationalist discourse' that in Jabiri's view qualifies Farabi as the Middle Ages' 'Rousseau of the Arabs'.[41]

The next big name who might be expected to develop Farabi's project is the philosopher Avicenna (980-1037 AD). Alas, Avicenna lived in the heartland of Persian culture and the influence of Farabi's writings on him was not developed into a political project, instead Avicenna used it to further his gnostic intellectual development. Avicenna's 'Eastern philosophy' which was to be adopted by the influential theologian al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111 AD) proved to be 'a project of national (Persian) philosophy' that impeded rationalism in the Islamic East. It was only in the Muslim West, al-Maghrib (Jabiri's country) and al-Andalus, that Farabi's rationalism was to be picked up and developed by Jabiri's hero, the philosopher Averroes (1126-1198 AD).[42]

Averroes was inspired by Aristotle's demonstrative knowledge, and in his commentary of Aristotle's work, Averroes added much of his own knowledge. Jabiri observes that 'there is a profoundly and specifically Averroist philosophy in his [i.e., Averroes] commentaries of Aristotle, a philosophy that is fundamentally rationalist, Muslim and Maghrebian by its problematics'.[43] Contemporary intellectual energy, Jabiri believes, should be spent to 'regain and reinvest the rationalist and the "liberal" gains' from the Islamic tradition'.[44] To do so, he envisages an 'Averroist' future arguing that the 'survival of our philosophical tradition, i.e., what is likely to contribute to our time, can only be Averroist'.[45]

Jabiri certainly gets the names and chronology of Islamic history correct, but the same cannot entirely be said about his analysis of the events. We need to bear in mind here that Jabiri considers himself as the author of a cultural project, he is explicit that he is exploring the past in order to help him resolve the problems of the present. In Jabiri's views, these problems are best remedied by Arab unity and the strengthening of Arab rationalism. In 'de-constructing' the texts, the method he chose for analysing the tradition, he ends up 'constructing' a history of a past that is conducive to the aspirations and needs he deems appropriate to the present. He therefore paints a specific past and future picture of the tradition as one that features the rise and fall and future rise of Arab rationalism.

Many are the factors that are omitted in Jabiri's history: The Shi'ites influence on the Mu'tazilites; a selective reading of the Mu'tazilites who were also the cause of an Inquisition (*mihna*), a period during which believers were coerced to believe that the Qur'ān was created

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[41] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

and not eternal, resulting in the imprisonment of those who disagreed with them;[46] the elitist 'virtuous city' of Farabi where philosophy assumes a quasi-dogma status in the state; the little, if any, room that Averroes can offer to modern aspirations of democracy and liberalism. Neither Farabi nor Averroes can be said to be fans of democracy, they discuss it briefly and they both classify it under what they consider as 'ignorant regimes'. This is a short and sweeping treatment of Islamic philosophy on my part, and it is not intended as an anti-philosophy stance. I am merely pointing out those aspects that Jabiri is omitting in his discourse at his convenience.

Noting the weak theoretical basis of Jabiri's discourse, Abdou Filali-Ansary, asks whether one 'has the right to reproach him when we know that the problem is essentially political'.[47] But even if we decide to drop the scholarly criterion to Jabiri's work, his approach is not even an inclusive one that would cater for contemporary challenges facing all Arabs (Muslims and non-Muslims) of the Arab world, let alone those Muslims living outside the borders of the Arab world. The Shi'ites who make up a sizeable proportion of the Arab population will not find a dignified place in Jabiri's account of the tradition nor in his aspiring age of Arab rationalism.

Examining Jabiri's analysis of the tradition in light of his own critique of existing discourses, one cannot help but ask what makes his discourse not qualify as Orientalist, if Orientalism, as he understands it, is a strictly ideological discourse? In other words, what makes his characterisation of Arab intellectual awareness as one of irrationality (*allâ'aqlâniyya*) different from the 'Semitic mind' the Orientalists theorised about?

Analysis

I am of Jabiri's view that Arab reformers were entrapped by the tradition. The reformers intended to pursue a modernist/reformist agenda. But they opted for promoting a renewal of the tradition as a political response to the rapidly modernising Europe that had an expansionist agenda into the territories of the Ottoman Empire from the late nineteenth century onward. In their minds, modernising came to mean being like and at the same time submitting to Europe. Those like Taha Hussein (1889-1973) who thought that following the European model is a step towards modernisation were not heeded.

But is it useful to explain the problématique of the tradition by speaking of an epistemic structure specific to the Arabic intellect? Or is it helpful to analyse it by drawing a divide between a gnostic and irrational Muslim East and a rational Muslim West, and by virtue of the latter's history of rationalism it will somehow come to the rescue of all of the Arab world? This discourse offers nothing more than imaginary solutions and ultimately replaces one dogma with another.

But why does this entrapment with the tradition persist in the minds of intellectuals? Is the reason political or intellectual, or both? In my view, there are two layers to this issue: it is a political problem in so far as the political (with all its socio-economic malaise) is what

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[46] Robert Mantran, *L'Expansion Musulmane (VIIe-XI siècles)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979, Chapter IV; Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mûn*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 117-28

[47] Filali-Ansary, *Réformer l'Islam?*, p. 145.

dominates the intellectual sphere; it is an intellectual problem in so far as the intellectuals are being political agents in intellectual denial. Here there exists a political problem that is generating an intellectual one, and the latter, in turn, is perpetuating that political problem and also generating another political problem of an intellectual order. What the intellectuals do not seem to be conscious of or at least they are not taking into consideration is the epistemic effect that their political project might have on their interpretation of the tradition. This is an important aspect because these intellectuals themselves make the same (legitimate) criticism of the Islamist discourse, when they subordinate the epistemic dimension of the religious tradition to the ideological agenda. They are however oblivious to the fact that the same principle applies even if one's interpretation of the tradition is intended for what they deem as a noble or politically correct cause.

The intellectual 'Ali Harb (who presents himself as someone working in the field of Philosophy) notes that the Arab intellectual discourse has seen a transformation in discourse from one that is founded on universal knowledge and intellect to one that is ideologically and struggle-driven. This transformation has impeded him to experience intellectual change and innovation.[48] Harb remarks that the obsession over political struggle in the Arab world has had a severe impact on the intellectual innovation because the central concern of a fighter is not to analyse but to be on the defensive. Karl Marx, Harb notes, was misleading when he famously said that the philosophers were preoccupied by explaining and understanding the world, and it is upon us now to change it. Marx, Harb emphasises, did not change the world as a fighter but as a philosopher.[49]

Conclusion

The view that these intellectuals' discourse serves to break the monopoly of the Islamists' discourse over what constitutes the Islamic tradition is a constructive contribution to political debates. But it is misleading to suggest that these intellectuals are actually critical or objective in their approach and interpretation of the tradition. Moreover, to suggest that the re-awakening of the philosophical current will lead to the flourishing of democratic and liberal values, as these intellectuals are arguing, does not actually follow from the content of the philosophic current of the tradition nor should it be expected to. The philosophical component is awkwardly, sometimes forcibly, integrated by many intellectuals who invoke its relevance. What one finds in such a discourse is a yearning for an intellectual mood that permitted the growth of a 'rational theology' (Mu'tazilite Kalam) and later of an Arabic-Islamic philosophy. This mood (and not the substance of classical philosophy) is often confused with liberal values that are meant to act as remedies for a modern political problem.

But it seems that Arab intellectuals are yet again entrapped. On one hand, their interpretations of the tradition can be seen as a response to that advanced by the Islamists which is gaining rapid momentum. On the other hand, they are naturally conditioned by intellectual developments in the West. But while the Arab world is still struggling with coming to terms with modernity, modernity is more or less passé in the West, at least for some Western intellectuals. Arab intellectuals are in many respects taking part in a post-colonial discourse that appeals to them because it allows them to be flexible vis-à-vis their interpretation of the Arabic-Islamic tradition and at the same time use and draw on (Western) criticism of the Western tradition, which they regard as the cause of their malaise. The

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[48] Ali Harb, *Hiwârât fî al-Fikr al-'Arabî al-Mu'âsir*, p. 293.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 292.

fundamental weakness of this discourse is that it is in serious denial that the Arabic-Islamic tradition is itself of imperial heritage! The intellectuals' discourse claims to be critical but in effect it is yet another layer adding to the existing epistemological obfuscation that they are seeking to remedy. If it is to be critical and credible, then, to paraphrase the words of Daryush Shayegan (Persian scholar), a sharp blade of a fundamental, merciless scrutiny should be brought to bear on even the most exclusive truths, be they religious or philosophical.[50]

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[50] Daryush Shayegan (trans. from the French by John Howe), *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, London: Saqi Books, 1992, p. 26.