

9/11 And The History Of Philosophy

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Introduction

There is nothing more significant about a philosophy than how it situates itself within or in respect to the history of philosophy. When it locates itself historically, a form of philosophy defines what philosophy itself is by placing this mode of human living, reflection, speaking, and writing *vis-à-vis* that in relation to which it emerged and has developed. This placing occurs in respect to genres (e.g. poetry, prose, face-to-face discourse, introspection, writing) and to other representations or imitations of the whole (e.g. most importantly, at least at its origins, to myth and religion and, in more modern times, to what are commonly called “sciences”). Designating its normal setting is also part of this historical placing. It will involve the question put most influentially in our time by Pierre Hadot as to whether philosophy is properly a way of life—as it was indisputably when it began and throughout the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods. As a way of life philosophy was thus carried on both in agora and in monastery, both in prison and in episcopal and imperial curia, both in the Neoplatonic schools headed by a “divine” successor to Plato and in Islamic *halqa* which took up their studies from the commentaries on the classical philosophical texts produced in the late ancient Neoplatonic and Peripatetic schools. For Hadot, philosophy’s move out of these situations and making the university its normal location was of the utmost significance. In his judgment, the present existence of philosophy as the abstractly theoretical production and manipulation of concepts divorced from life and serving other forms of knowing what is, other determinations of what is to be done, and other powers shaping the self and enabling life is a humiliating reduction and ruinous loss. Such diminished philosophy is hardly separable from paid professional work in the university. Hadot indicates the connection of place and character thus:

the university is .. made up of professors who train professors, or professionals training professionals. Education was thus no longer directed toward people who were to be educated with a view to becoming fully developed human beings, but to specialists, in order that they might train other specialists.¹

¹ Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, 270; see also idem, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* Collection Folio/Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) 355-407 at 389. For a description and assessment of Hadot’s position see W.J. Hankey, “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion,

Understood in this wide way, when philosophers, whether explicitly or implicitly, construct the historical structure for philosophy and locate their work and that of others within it, they prescribe what counts as reason. In consequence, they may be contributing to decisions which have life or death consequences. It is hard to know whether what our professional philosophers in their university departments do is of much influence and whether they are in fact regarded as professional experts on what ought to be regarded as rational. Nonetheless, they must play some role in shaping what we suppose reason to be and, rigorously delimiting philosophy and excluding from its rationality what may not count seems to be crucial to the activity of the philosophy departments at the dominant universities of the Anglo-American Protestant world. There, many of those who now make our wars received what we are pleased to call a liberal education. Especially since September 11, 2001, some of these, the most powerful of our political leaders, have told us that what they describe as free democratic Christian society is in a worldwide cultural war against what some of them call Islamo-fascism. Indeed, some of them have also led us into dreadfully murderous external wars against parts of the Islamic world and to a universal and never to be ended so-called “war against terror” largely directed against Muslims, which, among other evils, has institutionalised torture in societies which had defined themselves by opposition to it and been destructive of our civil liberties. The necessity of these wars—cultural, shooting, or metaphorical—and of the means employed have frequently been justified directly or indirectly by labelling the Islamic enemy as irrational because Islam itself and its cultural product are irrational. Let me adduce a few recently published articles in the *New York Times* which manifest diverse aspects and results of this approach.

On September 21st, David Brooks, generally supposed to possess access to what is being thought inside the White House, published a column in the *Times* which began by declaring that the international system was broken. He went on to lament that since 9/11 no consensus had been reached on what is moving the enemies and judged:

The core of the dispute is: Do the extremists play by the normal rules of geostrategy, or are their minds off in some mystical sphere that is utterly alien to our categories? Do they respond to incentives and follow the dictates of what we call self-interest? Can they be deterred by normal threats to their security? Or, alternatively, are they playing an entirely different game? Are the men who occupy the black hole that is the Iranian power elite engaged in a religious enterprise based on an eschatological time frame and driven by supernatural longings we can't begin to fathom?²

Answering these questions has serious consequences because, as he wrote “The definition of the threat determines the remedies we select to combat it...” According to Brooks:

Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 59:2 [Le Néoplatonisme] (Juin 2003): 193-224.

² David Brooks, “Lessons From U.N. Week,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2006.

Millions of Americans think the pope [in Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," University of Regensburg, Tuesday, 12 September 2006] asked exactly the right questions: Does the Muslim God accord with the categories of reason?... These millions of Americans believe the pope has nothing to apologize for. They regard the vicious overreaction to his speech, like the vicious overreaction to the Danish cartoons, as another sign that some sort of intellectual disease is sweeping through the Arab world.

Indeed, while lamenting the diminution of Hellenic rationality within Christian religion and the secularised remains of Christendom, the nub of the Pope's recent criticism of Islam was to locate its divinity outside rationality.³ A survey article in the *New York Times* produced in the wake of his lecture, "Across Europe, Worries on Islam Spread to Center," reported on what seemed to unite the European and the American millions. Evidence was adduced that more Europeans "in the political mainstream are arguing that Islam cannot be reconciled with European values."⁴ Although those surveyed often appeared to be thoroughly secularised, they seemed to agree with the Pope that reason was exclusively on their side of the conflict. Although the Islamic reaction to the Pope's animadversions induced him to more dialogue with Muslims than he previously envisaged, nothing like seems to be happening in Washington (or at Number 10 Downing Street.) On October 17th, Jeff Stein reported in the *Times* on a remarkable ignorance of the enemy. Stein has been asking "Washington counterterrorism officials": "Do you know the difference between a Sunni and a Shi'ite?"⁵ After what appears to have been a serious investigation, he concluded that:

most American officials I've interviewed don't have a clue. That includes not just intelligence and law enforcement officials, but also members of Congress who have important roles overseeing our spy agencies.... Too many officials in charge of the war on terrorism just don't care to learn much, if anything, about the enemy we're fighting.

³ See Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," University of Regensburg

Tuesday, 12 September 2006: "...for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. Here Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazn went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practise idolatry."

⁴ Dan Bilefsky and Ian Fisher; Dan Bilefsky reported From Brussels, and Ian Fisher From Rome, contributing were Sarah Lyall and Alan Cowell from London, Mark Landler from Frankfurt, Peter Kiefer from Rome, Renwick Mclean from Madrid and Maia De La Baume from Paris, "Across Europe, Worries on Islam Spread to Center," *New York Times*, October 11, 2006.

⁵⁵ Jeff Stein, "Can You Tell a Sunni From a Shiite?" *New York Times*, October 17, 2006.

What is reported and opined in these articles raises many questions including, for example, why the Islamic mystical sphere is alien and our own is not? and why we cannot begin to fathom the eschatological time frame and the supernatural longings of the Iranian power elite when some of those in the most powerful places in the Anglo-American world also operate out of an eschatological time frame and supernatural longings? In this paper I shall neither ask nor attempt to answer these or many other such questions. I want rather to consider three matters.

- 1) The first is how some important constructions of the history of philosophy in the Christian West—religious or secular—exclude Islamic philosophy not only in fact but in principle—thus, we may surmise, contributing to our notion that Muslims are moved irrationally and that their world is incomprehensible to us.
- 2) The second is how, especially in France, treatments of Islamic philosophy have been constructed which make it actual for the West.
- 3) The third is how the books on Arabic and Islamic philosophy published since 9/11 would require reshaping the histories of philosophy dominating our part of Western philosophical academe if we were to grant that the traditions they describe are real continuations of Hellenic philosophical rationality. Significantly, including Islamic philosophy would equally require including much of the Greek and Latin philosophy now neglected or excluded in principle by our university Philosophy departments.

I begin with a partial survey of how the history of philosophy is treated.

Treatments Of The History Of Philosophy

A. Harvard and Oxbridge

Because Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge have a pre-eminent academic prestige for the Anglo-American Protestant world, itself claiming a power unequalled in human history which gives America and Britain acting together the means and the responsibility to reshape the Islamic Middle East, the treatment of the history of philosophy there especially requires our attention. The degree to which Oxbridge and the Protestant Ivy League define the centre is exhibited by the fact that what they refuse to accept within the boundaries of philosophical reason is investigated outside their walls. Thus, while the exclusions of Harvard Philosophy are more or less reiterated within the rest of the Ivy League of secularised Calvinism, some of what is refused there is taught at the margins: Neoplatonism and medieval philosophy have a place in the Roman Catholic universities, in Canada, and within Canada especially in Québec. In consequence there is as much work done on Neoplatonism in Canada as there is in the USA or in Britain! In the British world, students can learn something about Neoplatonism at the Universities of Liverpool and London. Ireland plays a role like that of Québec in North America. Let us start with Harvard, which many regard as the greatest of universities, because none exceed it in the purity which exclusion gives.

North Americans found the 20th century's greatest historian of Medieval Philosophy, Étienne Gilson irresistible. The range and depth of his learning, the beauty of his imagination, and his capacity for moving rhetorical simplicity brought him repeated invitations to the summits of American academe. Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Berkeley, only to name some, welcomed him warmly. Nonetheless, after he got to know the leading philosophers on these exalted heights of WASP academe Gilson discovered that he was not really having any positive effect on how philosophy was done there. At Harvard he discerned not only that philosophy and its history were to be strictly separated in that world but that the first was thought to depend upon ignorance of the second. Professor Gilson reported after a visit:

As for the history of philosophy, they don't see any use for it. Perry is quite upset. He thinks that too much studying of the systems of others prevents young people from finding one of their own.⁶

A 1938 review of Gilson's *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* in *The Yale Review* gives us a reason for neglecting the philosophy of the premodern world in particular. The author agreed with Gilson that modern philosophy has been self-destructively skeptical, but continued: "for all its inadequacy the modern world has at least moved on, and in the process it has tremendously increased its positive knowledge and its technical skill." As a result, "the possibility is again open of reason developing the logical consequences of the positive knowledge of empirical science without destroying itself in the process."

Richard McKeon in the same journal, when reviewing *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, put the same kind of reasoning in another way, one which it is important for us to note. McKeon concluded:

...the exposition of a Christian philosophy, based on a religious foundation, which Professor Gilson himself recognizes...will not again, in the absence of that religious spirit, serve for unification for mankind...Most modern readers...will find little in the doctrines of the Middle Ages...which can be recognized as directly relevant to modern problems. For the justification of philosophy is by the reason it employs, not the faith which it may seek to understand.⁷

Philosophy in WASP America would serve positive science which it supposed united mankind, not religion which divided it. For it Gilson's position belonged to the same dead world where they would also have located Islamic philosophy had they been

⁶ See Gilson in L.K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, The Étienne Gilson Series 6 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 150.

⁷ C.A. Hart, *New Scholasticism*, 25 (1951), 42. The review of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* is in *The Yale Review*, 28 (1938): 203-205; Richard McKeon's review is in *The Yale Review*, 26 (1936-37): 396-397.

interested in it. This was the period in which the British Empire had finally reached its greatest extent by acquiring a whole new set of possessions and dependencies in the Middle East. It occurred to none on the leading heights of Anglo-American Protestant power that the modern world might not have definitively “moved on” and that the avatars might resurrect and even successfully attack the capitals of its empire.

In any case the refusal of most of its history which Gilson found at Harvard seventy years ago still belongs to the definition of what Philosophy does there. The Department is not large—it has less than thirty members even including visitors and “other Harvard Faculty offering instruction in Philosophy.”⁸ There is at present no class offered in the Department on the philosophical developments in the two millennia between Aristotle and Descartes apart from classes on medieval science given in the history of science programme. When I was a Visiting Scholar there in 2001 and sought to find someone who worked on Neoplatonism I was referred to Robert Wisnovsky, not in Philosophy but in Islamic studies, whose magisterial book entitled *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* appeared in 2003. This extraordinarily learned and philosophically acute study, dependent on a mastery of the Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources as well as on the multilingual modern scholarship, shows how Avicenna’s metaphysics takes its departure from unresolved problems in later Greek Neoplatonism. Despite the gaps in what Harvard knew which Wisnovsky filled, by the time I returned as a Visiting Scholar in 2005 Wisnovsky had moved to Québec where at McGill he had become head of the distinguished Islamic Institute. His learning has not been replaced at Harvard. When recently the Department of the Classics attempted to appoint an expert in Neoplatonism, the Philosophy Department said that it would refuse to recognise her classes. As Gilson discovered, ignorance of the history of philosophy at Harvard is principled and determined.

Cambridge across the Atlantic sympathises with its younger protégée in the way that it treats philosophy much as it once did in religion. The only person listed as a member of the Faculty of Philosophy who bridges the gap between Classical ancient philosophy and the 17th and 18th century moderns is John Marenbon.⁹ However, this learned historian of medieval philosophy of an analytical cast of mind is not actually a teaching member of the Faculty at all but rather holds a research post at Trinity College where, as his official webpage tells us, “he runs an informal history of philosophy seminar,” in which I participated while a Visiting Fellow there. His predecessor, the important historian of medieval philosophy Peter Dronke, was kept out of the Faculty of Philosophy altogether, holding a post in the department of “Other Languages”! Neither the leading world expert on Avicenna’s logic, Tony Street, nor the student of Werner Beierwaltes, Douglas Hedley, an expert on Platonism in the modern world, are part of the Faculty of Philosophy. Both are located in the Faculty of Divinity. No one holds a post to teach Neoplatonism at Cambridge.

⁸ See <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~phildept/>

⁹ See <http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/>

The Faculty of Philosophy at Oxford describes itself as “one of the world’s great centres for philosophy” with “more than seventy professional philosophers.”¹⁰ What it excludes as philosophical reason will then be of the greatest importance. There Ancient philosophy goes no later than Stoicism and Skepticism. Although the distinguished historian of the ancient Peripatetic tradition, Richard Sorabji, is listed among the seventy, in fact he has retired from the University of London where he was replaced by the excellent young historian of Arabic philosophy, Peter Adamson, and his position at Oxford is as an Honorary Fellow of Wolfson. No one has taught Neoplatonism at Oxford since the great Eric Dodds retired forty years ago. His groundbreaking studies were motivated by a genuine philosophical enthusiasm for what he investigated. However, not only was Dodds in Classics not Philosophy—he was Regius Professor of Greek—but even there he was pressured out of teaching about the school which dominated philosophy for more than a thousand years.¹¹ My arrival at Oxford in 1978 to do a D.Phil. on Aquinas’s Neoplatonism had been immediately preceded by the folding up of the Readership in Medieval Philosophy when L. Minio-Paluello retired after a life devoted to publishing painstaking editions of the medieval Latin translations of the Arabic philosophers. I was required to travel to Paris and Rome to find help with my research. Within the last few years Minio-Paluello has finally been replaced by Cecilia Trifogli, another Italian philologist-historian who works mostly on the history of science in the Middle Ages. Brian Leftow, who occupies the Nolloth Chair in the Philosophy of the Christian Religion located at Oriel, has a professional interest in Medieval philosophy. Richard Cross, also at Oriel, and Marilyn McCord Adams, a Canon Professor at Christ Church, are certainly authentic experts on medieval philosophy, but they are placed outside the professional seventy; their appointments are in the Faculty of Theology. Fritz W. Zimmerman, a Fellow of one of my colleges in Oxford, St Cross, and the Lecturer in Islamic Philosophy in the Oriental Institute, is likewise an outsider. He has published both translations of Islamic philosophical texts and articles on the connection of Islamic philosophy with Neoplatonism, although nothing has appeared for almost a decade. To what does all this amount?

As one might expect given the unsystematic modes of Oxford and of the English mind, and given the number of philosophers there, an enormous range of historical learning and philosophical speculation is to be found. Philosophy at Oxford is a full and varied jackdaw’s nest—not for it the Puritanical exclusions of Harvard or even of Cambridge. There is no endeavour, however, to provide access to all the essential elements of the history of western philosophy, let alone an attempt to find their connection. In general the approach at Oxford is to separate the philosophical arguments as logical questions from the contexts in which they occur. Thus, although Medieval philosophy is not excluded in principle, because arguments deemed worth considering are to be found in its massive bulk, the Neoplatonism, which underlay its connecting and distinguishing of philosophy and religion and which most completely considered the need

¹⁰ See <http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/>

¹¹ See my “Re-evaluating E.R. Dodds’ Platonism,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 (2005), in press.

for this relation, is not taught. Moreover, the continuous tradition of Hellenic philosophy within Islam is not regarded as something required in order that we might have a full understanding of the range, kinds, and conditions of philosophical reasoning.

B. Islamic Philosophy in France

Before passing on to say a word or two about how Islamic philosophy is located within treatments of the history of philosophy in France—which requires a reference to Germany—, it will be useful to return briefly to Étienne Gilson. Evidently he came out of the French academic world which aims to give a full account of the history of philosophy including both that of western Europe and of the Islamic world. In Paris, when the offerings and researches of the universities, the Collège de France, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) are combined, there is an expert edition, translation, exposition, and analysis of the texts of the history of philosophy, Western, Middle Eastern and Oriental, by philosophically educated historians and philologists and a philosophical engagement with their ideas not to be matched anywhere else in the world. Gilson’s outstanding contribution was to the development of medieval philosophy both in terms of extending exact historical knowledge and in terms of the present demands of its intellectual claims as “Christian philosophy.” Within that development, and as essential to it, he worked with many to expand our knowledge of Islamic and Jewish philosophy in our Middle Ages. The use of what he and his fellow Christian medieval historians accomplished is recognised by Islam’s own historians of philosophy. Nonetheless, the facts that these Westerners were only interested in the “role played by Islamic philosophy in Latin scholasticism,”¹² and that many students of Western philosophy only know about it in that context, may lead to the kind of misunderstanding of its character displayed by the Regensburg lecture of Pope Benedict XVI. Partly this misunderstanding may stem from the fact that the 12th and 13th centuries, the point at which the influence of Islamic philosophy of the West was greatest, was also the point at which, within Sunni Islam *falsafah* had both reached its greatest intellectual power and influence and was declining. Following the attacks of al-Ghazzali and the response of Ibn Rushd (our Averroës), Seyyed Hossein Nasr tells us both that “in the western lands of Islam,” *falsafah* “ceased to exist as an independent and rigorously defined discipline” and also that “in the eastern lands of Islam and particularly in Persia the role [and future] of *falsafah* was quite different.”¹³ Thus, even if (and there are problems with this) Sunni Islam were able to be convicted of irrationalism in virtue of the loss of philosophy as “an independent and rigorously defined discipline,” this would not be a criticism which could be sustained against Islam as such. To convict Islam of irrationalism on this basis would be like condemning Christianity of the same because of Calvinism’s predestinarianism and Protestantism’s general opposition to natural

¹² See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophesy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

theology.¹⁴ An error of the same kind is made when the ideas of the most extreme school within Islamic *Kalām* (i.e. dialectical or scholastic theology) are used to convict Islam itself of irrational voluntarism. Unfortunately, those basing their views on Hegel's account of Islam do just this.

(B-1) *G.W.F. Hegel*

Hegel's treatment of philosophy and theology in Islam is largely derived from Moses Maimonides. As long as Hegel is treating "Arabian philosophy," he does well enough given what he knew of the phenomena. There is the limitation like that of Gilson and his associates that Hegel is only interested in the Arabs as receiving Greek intellectual culture and passing it on to the West. Nonetheless, he recognised their intellectual genius, the love of philosophy, and something of the character of the result. Hegel says:

Philosophy, along with all the other arts and sciences, flourished to an extraordinary degree...[It] was fostered and cherished among the Arabians...In the Arabic philosophy, which shows a free, brilliant and profound degree of imagination, Philosophy and the sciences took the same bent that they had taken earlier among the Greeks...Consequently it is the Alexandrian or Neo-Platonic Idea which forms the essential principle or basis of the Arabian as well as of the Scholastic philosophy, and all that Christian philosophy offers...[I]t will be found that the main dogmas of this philosophy have much in common with those of the Scholastics.¹⁵

Hegel says nothing, however, about what the Islamic philosophers changed in the Hellenic deposit so as to deliver it to the Latins in a different form than that in which they had received it. The most important of these transformations is characterised by Alain de Libera in terms of establishing the philosophical known world as a scientifically constructed totality over against what is made known by religious revelation. As de Libera puts it, the Arabs mediated the texts of Aristotle to the Latins as "a total philosophic corpus, into which the whole of Hellenistic thought, profoundly

¹⁴ See Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University": "Dehellenization first emerges in connection with the postulates of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Looking at the tradition of scholastic theology, the Reformers thought they were confronted with a faith system totally conditioned by philosophy, that is to say an articulation of the faith based on an alien system of thought. As a result, faith no longer appeared as a living historical Word but as one element of an overarching philosophical system. The principle of sola scriptura, on the other hand, sought faith in its pure, primordial form, as originally found in the biblical Word. Metaphysics appeared as a premise derived from another source, from which faith had to be liberated in order to become once more fully itself. When Kant stated that he needed to set thinking aside in order to make room for faith, he carried this programme forward with a radicalism that the Reformers could never have foreseen. He thus anchored faith exclusively in practical reason, denying it access to reality as a whole."

¹⁵ *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. Haldane and Simson [1896] reprint (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), iii, 26-29.

neoplatonised, had surreptitiously crept.”¹⁶ This is a very different view of philosophy from that which Aquinas found among either his Christian or his pagan Hellenic sources and sets the point of departure for the *Summa Theologiae*, providing what moves him to establish for Latin Christians the basis of a secular humanism.¹⁷ Hegel’s treatment becomes deeply problematic—not to say polemical—when he goes on to describe the *Kalām*. Hegel is very clear that his source, Maimonides, is describing a movement in philosophical theology which Rambam rightly supposed began among Byzantine Christians, which spread from them to Jewish and Islamic theologians, and which Maimonides, standing on the shoulders of his Islamic philosophical co-workers, opposed.¹⁸ Maimonides cannot be blamed for Hegel’s polemical misrepresentation; he has a proper veneration for the Islamic Peripatetics to whom he owes his philosophical education. Hegel takes Maimonides’ description of the most extremely voluntaristic sect of these dialectical theologians—a position which may be compared to the most extreme Calvinistic predestinarianism or Malebranche’s occasionalism among Christians—to describe the Islamic idea of God itself and its philosophical result.¹⁹ Benedict XVI may be a victim of the continuation of Hegel’s polemical misrepresentations among German intellectual historians. Although the Pope himself would not make this mistake, a condemnation of Islam by Christians on this basis forgets that an extreme voluntarism continually repeats itself within Christianity especially among those under the influence of Augustine.²⁰ Unless they had no access to Christian thinkers except the most extreme Augustinians between Duns Scotus and Pascal, fair-minded judges would not condemn

¹⁶ Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 20. For brief description of this Aristotelianism, see idem, *La querelle des universaux: De Platon à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Des travaux (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 117 and 68-124.

¹⁷ See my “Aquinas at the Origins of Secular Humanism? Sources and innovation in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a.1,” *Nova et Vetera* [The English Edition of the International Theological Journal], 5:1 (2007): 17-40.

¹⁸ *Hegel’s Lectures*, iii, 27-28, 30-31, 35-36.

¹⁹ For an example of a continuation of these errors and polemics in the American imperial interest see Floy Elizabeth Doull, “Wanted: A Philosophical Foundation for the Equality of Religion and Culture in Canada,” in *Multiculturalism and Religious Freedom*, ed. Susan Harris (Charlottetown: St. Peter Publications, 2005), 157-186. For an example of the best kind of alternative see Ernest Wolf-Gazo, “Contextualizing Averroes within the German Hermeneutical Tradition,” *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 16 (1996): 133-163.

²⁰ Benedict acknowledges in “Faith, Reason and the University”: “In all honesty, one must observe that in the late Middle Ages we find trends in theology which would sunder this synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit. In contrast with the so-called intellectualism of Augustine and Thomas, there arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which, in its later developments, led to the claim that we can only know God’s voluntas ordinata. Beyond this is the realm of God’s freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done. This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazn and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God’s transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions.”

Christianity on a whole on the ground of this tendency in its theology.²¹ We must consider below what motivates Hegel's misrepresentation of Islam which has been useful, together with the rest of his history of philosophy, to constructing the mentality of Protestant Western imperialism.

(B-2) *Émile Bréhier*

With Hegel and with the French in his wake—whether they are following him, their own Auguste Comte (1790-1856), or Heidegger's reaction against the Hegelian unification of being, thought, and history²²—philosophy and its history are inextricably intertwined. In his attempt to promote the idea of Christian philosophy Gilson's first opponent was a figure whom I shall designate as the default historian of philosophy for 20th century France, Emile Bréhier (1876-1952). As an philosophical historian of philosophy, Bréhier unites Hegel, Comte, and a deep study of Neoplatonism in a way which illumines the 20th century French historiography of philosophy for us.

Bréhier not only constructed a complete history of Western philosophy but also considered how the modern constructions of the history could be and were made. He tells us the:

feeling that philosophy essentially has a history was intensified when, in the 18th century, it was recognised that there is a solidarity as between the various periods in human development. Spiritual life can only be described as a reality which has developed gradually...²³

This conception began in connection with sacred history but was secularised by Condorcet. His work:

Led...to the assertion that there is a unity in the evolution of the mind which makes all doctrines necessarily successive aspects of the same idea. Between them no real and complete opposition is possible: their diversity and opposition are reabsorbed into the unity of history. It is a fact...that the great speculative minds of the beginning of the 19th century, Hegel and Auguste Comte, sought in their turn for the rhythm and cadence of this

²¹ Benedict discerningly places "Pascal's distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" as the point of departure for the second wave of Dehellenization.

²² See Pierre Aubenque, "La question de l'ontothéologie chez Aristote et Hegel," en *La question de dieu selon Aristote et Hegel*, éd. Thomas de Koninck et Guy Planty-Bonjour (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991), 259–83 and my "Why Heidegger's "History" of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 78:3 (2004): 425-443.

²³ É. Bréhier, "The Formation of our History of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and History, essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*, edited by Raymond Klibansky and H.L. Paton, 1st ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936; reprint Harper Torch Books. New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 159–172 at 166.

evolution; for, in history as they conceive it, a doctrine...is...a necessary moment in the evolution which produces it and which carries it away.²⁴

The Middle Ages posed the greatest problem for the construction of this progressive history—a problem which was solved by Hegel when he “saw in Christianity...the essential principle of modern philosophy.”²⁵ For these progressive historians, as for Aristotle, the nature of a living being and also the stages of its growth can only be judged when it has reached its perfection. In consequence, as Bréhier writes:

This is why the history of philosophy in Comte and Hegel... is an inverted history, which really begins at the end, and disposes all its content in time according to its view of the issue of the process. It is in the philosophy of mind of Hegel and in the positivism of Comte that we must seek the explanation of the riddle of history, or rather, the authority for treating history as a riddle to be solved...[Previous historians] always write history as if we had arrived at what the Apocalypse calls the ‘end of time’. This allows the Hegelians to treat the history of philosophy as a revelation of the mind to itself, and to approach the history of thought with the respect which the theologian shows for the Scriptures: the *Entwicklung* is a *Selbstoffenbarung*.²⁶

As with Hegel, in this own work when he functions as an historian, Bréhier says of himself, “I remain a philosopher.” He writes of his history: “it is first a recitation as faithful as I am capable of making it; it is, however, not only a recitation and...my final purpose...is to disengage, in its purity, the essence of philosophy,”²⁷ the rationality, which he regarded as needing to be protected and promoted. Bréhier makes his dependence explicit: Hegel (and Comte) provide the basis, and Hegel (and Leibniz) give the model for unifying philosophy and history.²⁸ Nonetheless, for him the nineteenth-century predecessors represent an extreme position where “The past is no longer opposed to the present; the past conditions it and, justified by it, the past merely unfolds the unity of a systematic and preconceived plan.”²⁹ This criticism is not, however, a rejection. Bréhier identifies his own work in writing the history of philosophy with a conception of philosophical reason he finds in Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*:

²⁴ Ibid., 166-167.

²⁵ Ibid., 167.

²⁶ Ibid., 168 and 171.

²⁷ Bréhier, “Comment je comprends,” 7 & 9.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ É. Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy*, i, 23.

The history of philosophy is the development of a “single living mind” taking possession of itself; it merely sets forth in time what philosophy itself, “liberated from external historical circumstances, sets forth in a pure state in the element of thought.”³⁰

Nonetheless, Bréhier’s following of Hegel is limited. At the beginning of the concluding chapter of his book on Plotinus, he writes:

Not that I consider Plotinian thought an entity in itself which was purely and simply added to prevailing ideas and maintained in full in later thought. The history of philosophy does not reveal to us ideas existing in themselves, but only the men who think. Its method, like every historical method, is nominalistic. Ideas do not, strictly speaking, exist for it.³¹

Furthermore, for Bréhier, “collective philological work pursued without intermission” must now correct the great systematic visions which have made modern history of philosophy possible.

Crucially for our investigation Bréhier shared Hegel’s negative view of what both of them called the “Oriental” and in terms of which Hegel defined Islamic philosophy. He had written:

We...see an utter inconstancy of everything; and this whirl of all things is essentially Oriental. But at the same time, this is certainly also a complete dissolution of all that pertains to reasonableness, in harmony with the Eastern exaltation of spirit, which allows of nothing definite.³²

Bréhier follows Hegel closely when he treats Islamic philosophy, something he does briefly under the rubric of “Philosophy in the East,” a chapter occurring within and in service to his survey of Medieval Latin philosophy.³³ For him

The Islamic concept of divine arbitrariness stands in sharp contrast to the concept of a rational order of development which the Greek philosophers introduced into the world.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 22.

³¹ Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 182.

³² *Hegel’s Lectures*, iii, 33.

³³ É. Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, *The Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, translated by Wade Baskin (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 88-112.

³⁴ Ibid., 89-90.

His section on “The Moslem Theologians” concludes with the same “atomistic theory advocated by the school of Askari (876-935)” in terms of which Hegel had summed up Muslim divinity.³⁵ The Islamic philosophy is “essentially a Neo-Platonic interpretation of the whole of Aristotle’s work,” which, in virtue of its religious and mystical aspects, Bréhier represented as betraying “the spirit of Aristotle.”³⁶ Its history seems to come to an end with Averroës. The externality of religion *vis-à-vis* philosophy (and the Oriental *vis-à-vis* the Occidental) which Bréhier finds here presented itself to him from the beginning of his historical studies. These had commenced with a consideration of the works of Philo of Alexandria.³⁷

Shortly after his book on Philo appeared, Bréhier published a monograph on *Chrysippus* and then moved on to finding “a disassociation between rational philosophy and positive philosophy” in Schelling, partly owed to religion. With this behind him, he undertook the study of Plotinus. There he found again the duality of Occidental reason and Oriental mysticism. In treating Plotinus, Bréhier determinatively follows Hegel, who is praised as “a man who was particularly qualified through his mental disposition to comprehend Plotinus.”³⁸ For the two of them, in Plotinian mystical elevation, there is not really a passage beyond thought; instead, Bréhier judges, quoting Hegel:

Replying to the objections of those who make of Plotinus a mystical enthusiast, Hegel says that for Plotinus ecstasy was “pure thought which exists in itself [*bei sich*] and has itself for object.” “Plotinus had the idea that the essence of God is thought itself and that the essence is present in thought.”...It follows from this that the One is not, as one might think at first, the region where philosophic thought leaves off in order to be transformed into the inarticulate stammering of the mystic. The reality of the One corresponds to the affirmation of the essential autonomy of the spiritual life when this life is comprehended in itself, not through isolated fragments but in its concrete fullness. That is why Hegel was right in saying that “the thought of the Plotinian philosophy is an intellectualism or a lofty idealism.”³⁹

For Bréhier, Plotinus’s quest for mystical union does not come from within Hellenism:

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁷ See my *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, published with *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*, by Jean-Marc Narbonne, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 120-130.

³⁸ Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 190.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 190–191. Bréhier is quoting Hegel, *Werke*, XV, 39–41.

[W]e find at the very center of Plotinus' thought a foreign element which defies classification. The theory of Intelligence as universal being derives neither from Greek rationalism nor from the piety diffused throughout the religious circles of his day.... Thus I am led to seek the source of the philosophy of Plotinus beyond the Orient close to Greece, in the religious speculations of India, which by the time of Plotinus had been founded for centuries on the Upanishads and had retained their vitality.... With Plotinus, then, we lay hold of the first link in a religious tradition which is no less powerful basically in the West than the Christian tradition, although it does not manifest itself in the same way. I believe that this tradition comes from India.⁴⁰

Among twentieth-century Plotinian scholars, Bréhier's theory of an Indian source for Plotinus and his analysis of Plotinian mysticism as a supreme intellectualism are altogether exceptional, placing him outside the overwhelming consensus.⁴¹ For Hegel, they are necessities of his progressive history of philosophy; it cannot in principle have returned from rational subjectivity to "the inarticulate stammering of the mystic." Equally with Bréhier they belong to how he understands philosophy and the purpose of his life's labour.

It is essential to Bréhier's understanding of Plotinus, as well as to his shaping of the history of philosophy generally, that philosophy, and intellectual contemplation, which are for him peculiar to the Occident, and the desire for mystical union beyond thought, which for him belongs to religion and is Oriental, be kept separate. Bréhier's separation and the rejection of that separation both by his contemporaries like Gilson and also by his successors are crucial to the debate about the history of philosophy in France, giving it life. Among his French contemporaries, the issues involved emerge clearly in respect to the history of medieval philosophy.

The mixture of Hegelian and positivist shaping of the history of philosophy comes out strongly in Bréhier's *The Philosophy of the Middle Ages*. Henri Berr, the editor of the series in which Bréhier's volume appeared—significantly titled: "Library of the Evolution of Humanity, collective synthesis; Second section, VII: the intellectual evolution,"—sums up Bréhier's argument in terms of a recovery of the authentic Occidental heritage of the Greeks by the elimination of this Oriental element.⁴² Bréhier himself writes that:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 116–18.

⁴¹ A.M. Wolters, "A Survey of Modern Scholarly Opinion on Plotinus and Indian Thought," in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, edited by R. Baine Harris (Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Study, 1982), 293–308 at 296–99.

⁴² É. Bréhier, *La Philosophie du Moyen Âge*, Bibliothèque de l'évolution de l'humanité, synthèse collective; Deuxième section, VII: L'évolution intellectuelle (Paris: Albin Michel, 1937), ii.

Philosophy received its original impulse in Greece and, from this impulse, it has retained the love and the passion for freedom; I do not deny that philosophy is a rare plant in the whole of humanity, indeed we may even call it a fragile plant; and there has not been, so far as I know, any philosophy named and characterised precisely in this way elsewhere than in our Western civilization.⁴³

Preserving this rare and fragile plant by searching the history in order to discern the pure essence of philosophy was the work to which he devoted his life. Evidently openness to the ongoing association of philosophy and religion which characterises Islamic philosophy will not help guard the threatened life of this historically unique Hellenic and Western rationality.

If Bréhier writes a remarkably comprehensive history of philosophy which despite its inclusiveness tends to designate the Islamic as irrational, there are quite opposite currents in French philosophy and its constructions of history. I have touched on some of them:

1. the Heideggerian criticism of Hegel and his unification of being and logos, with history,
2. a totally opposed conception of Neoplatonism and of the relations of reason, mysticism, and religion which such a rethinking of Neoplatonism implies, and
3. the treatment of Islamic philosophy by Alain de Libera.

I shall close my treatment of French history of philosophy with remarks on two of these: Henry Corbin, who, under the influence of Heidegger and contemporaneously with those under the same influence who rescued Neoplatonism from Hegelian service to the progressive march of Western rationality, wrote the first history of Islamic philosophy taking it up to the present and making it philosophically actual, and Alain de Libera who in opposition to the Heideggerian account of Western metaphysics endeavoured to restore and reuse the philosophical bridge which the medievals constructed across the Islamic Jewish Christian divide. I begin with the younger, de Libera, not only because his work is more immediately intelligible within the categories we already have before us, but also because Corbin leads more directly to the last part of this paper.

(B-3) Alain de Libera

Alain de Libera is at present Ordinary Professor of Philosophy at the University of Geneva where he occupies the Chair in the History of Medieval Philosophy. Born in 1948 he belongs to the same generation as Jean-Luc Marion (he is two years younger than Marion) and they have been collaborators in rewriting the history of philosophy in France after Bréhier. He comes out of the same intellectual milieu as Marion having received much of his university formation at the *École pratique des hautes études*, V^e

⁴³ É. Bréhier, "Comment je comprends l'histoire de la philosophie," (1947) reprinted in idem, *Études de philosophie antique*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 1–9 at 8.

Section, Sciences religieuses. The EPHE, founded in 1868, is “pratique” because the teaching is conducted by research scholars introducing the auditeurs to the method and content of their research. It shares with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, a purely research organisation, the peculiarity of including Catholic priests who according to the laws of French “Laïcité”⁴⁴ are otherwise forbidden to teach in the public education system—which is the only one to give degrees recognised by the state! There de Libera studied under the great lay and clerical French scholars of Neoplatonism, and of Medieval and Islamic Philosophy like René Roques, Paul Vignaux, Pierre Hadot, and Jean Jolivet, and alongside historians of philosophy, philosophers, and philologists like Marion, Philippe Hoffmann, [Michel Tardieu](#), and Alain Segonds. Here philosophy is done and its history studied in the world’s greatest institute for Sciences religieuses having been founded in the later 19th century as an acceptable substitute for theology in the institutions of a secular state.⁴⁵ While the mentality in the V^e Section is not that of the theologian, all the relations of philosophy and religion, affirmative and critical, are investigated there. From 1975 de Libera taught in this section of the École eventually becoming Directeur d’études of Histoire des théologies chrétiennes dans l’occident médiéval, a Chair, which, under the title Histoire des doctrines et des dogmes, had been occupied by Étienne Gilson, and then, as Histoire des théologies médiévales, by Paul Vignaux. At the CNRS he was, from 1984 to 1998, responsable for l’équipe d’Histoire de la pensée médiévale du Centre d’études des religions du Livre, which evidently combines the study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

With the teachers and fellow students he had de Libera could not have helped breathing in the Heideggerian philosophical air and many of his extraordinarily voluminous writings show the general preoccupation with the question of the so-called

⁴⁴ “Laïcité” has a widely varying group of meanings resulting from its long evolution within Western Christendom generally and in France particularly; at its harshest it is a notion which exceeds the American separation of church and state, being used by the French republic at present to assert the absolute autonomy of the secular power and excludes Catholic clergy and religious from teaching in the state schools or universities and recently persons who display religious symbols from state institutions. See “Laïc/laïcat,” *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, sous la direction de Jean-Yves Lacoste, 2^e éd. (Paris: Quadrige/ Presses Universitaires de France, 2002) 639-642 at 639. For its effects on the university and scholarship, see my *Cent Ans De Néoplatonisme En France*, 123-268, 154ff. De Libera’s argument in *Raison et Foi* neither justifies, nor seems to intend to justify, the extreme exclusion and control of religion currently associated with *laïcité*. In appropriating the teachings of John Paul II, his interest does not seem to go further than the protection of the autonomy of research and teaching in the university from religious intolerance in a way that the Pope might well support.

⁴⁵ See Jean Baubérot, Jacques Béguin, François Laplanche, Émile Poulat, Claude Tradits, Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cent ans de sciences religieuses en France à l’École pratique des hautes études*, Sciences humaines et religions (Paris: Cerf, 1987) and Paul Vignaux, (éd.) *Problèmes et Méthodes, d’histoire des religions. Mélanges publiés par la Section des Sciences religieuses à l’occasion du centenaire de l’École pratique des Hautes Études* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).

onto-theological structure of Western metaphysics. Despite Heidegger's own judgments about it, this is one of the rare atmospheres in the Western contemporary world which gives life to Neoplatonism and its offshoots because it offers a philosophical alternative to the traps of ontology—and to writing the history of philosophy as the Hegelian march forward of subjectivity. Within this framework de Libera developed an understanding of the Arabic Peripatetics, whose work provided the philosophical foundation for Aquinas and the scholastics of the 13th century generally. He contributed to showing how their Aristotle conveyed Platonism. De Libera writes of them:

Il n'y a plus à concilier Aristote et Platon, car Aristote lui-même a absorbé le platonisme, non plus certes le platonisme de Platon, mais celui du Plotinus Arabus et du Proclus Arabus. Le fruit de cette improbable assimilation est le péripatétisme arab.⁴⁶

According to de Libera this “syncretistic” Neoplatonism, “which corrects Plato by Aristotle and completes Aristotle with Plato” and of which Albert the Great is the Latin propagator, enables the reception of “Peripatetic philosophy into the Christian, Platonist tradition.”⁴⁷

Without denying the correctness of any of his earlier work, de Libera has recently moved on—together with the rest of French philosophy generally—to a radical questioning of the Heideggerian framing of the history of philosophy. Once all the Neoplatonic alternatives within the history are admitted into the forum of philosophical metaphysics, the French are coming to judge with Jean-François Courtine “that Heidegger possessed a completely frozen and reductive notion of medieval metaphysics” and to determine, in consequence, with Rudi Imbach—who now holds the Chair in Medieval Philosophy at the Sorbonne—“that Western metaphysics is a barbarous and bastard, but vigorous, child of a formidable interbreeding.”⁴⁸ De Libera has contributed to showing what Neoplatonism gave to this “formidable interbreeding” and concludes:

By a certain type of subtle archaeology, liberated from the horizon of onto-theology, I believe, in any case, that it is possible to approach in a

⁴⁶ A. de Libera, *La querelle des universaux: De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age*, Des travaux (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 117 and see 68-124.

⁴⁷ de Libera, *La querelle*, 245-262 at 257 and to somewhat the same effect E. Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers*, Cambridge Studies in medieval life and thought III, 20 (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 163-267 with the contrast between “Albertus Magnus: A logico-emanationist figure as a means of accepting Peripatetic philosophy into the Christian, Platonist tradition” and “Thomas Aquinas: the ‘Aufhebung’ of Radical Aristotelian ontology into a PseudoDionysian-Proclean ontology of ‘esse’”.

⁴⁸ R. Imbach, “Heidegger et la philosophie médiévale,” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, 49 (2002): 426–435 at 431 and 435; see J.-F. Courtine, “Métaphysique et Onto-théologie,” in *Actes du XXVII^e Congrès de l’Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française. La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, édité par Luc Langlois et Jean-Marc Narbonne, Collection Zétésis (Paris/Québec: Vrin/Presses de l’Université Laval, 2000).

true historical way the plurality of medieval metaphysics, and at the same time it is possible also perhaps to throw a bridge between the metaphysics of yesterday and the metaphysics of today.⁴⁹

His erection of this bridge is of crucial interest to us.

Most of de Libera's work concerns epistemology and a great part of the work of two decades is gathered in his volume entitled *La querelle des universaux*. It makes Islamic philosophy actual insofar as it shows how the same problems bequeathed to the world by the opposed Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to knowing are taken up in different, and always illuminating, ways by the later Neoplatonists and Peripatetics, their Islamic philosophical heirs, the Latin medievals, German Idealism and 20th century Phenomenology.⁵⁰ It is not, however, to this that I would have us turn. His *Raison et Foi: Archéologie d'une crise d'Albert le Grand à Jean-Paul II*⁵¹ published in 2003 is part of his endeavour to use the study of the religious and intellectual culture of the Middle Ages—a period in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam met through the medium of philosophy—to illumine both their meeting with one another and the clash of secular institutions with them in our contemporary societies. His last chapter is entitled: “Les enfants de Billy Graham et de Mecca-Cola.” De Libera sees an intolerance accompanying the religious revival which is taking place in the 21st century and judges that this intolerant religiosity is a threat both to what the French call *laïcité*, and also to the university which de Libera calls, “*institution de chrétienté*.” He writes: “the institution which has made the autonomy of research and science its founding charter sees itself reproached today because of its tolerance.”⁵² He makes the struggles within institutions, philosophy, and theology at the 13th century University of Paris actual for the problematic of our own versions of these by exhibiting how the disputes between the philosophers and theologians of 13th century Paris picked up from and restructured the disputes between the *Kalām* and *falsafah* within the Islamic world. He argues that Aquinas' polemic against the Parisian Aristotelians invented the notion of Latin Averroism and the

⁴⁹ A. de Libera, “Genèse et structure des métaphysiques médiévales,” in Langlois et Narbonne (éds.), *La métaphysique: son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux*, 159–181 at 181.

⁵⁰ de Libera, *La querelle*, 105-108, 206-212.

⁵¹ Alain de Libera, *Raison et Foi: Archéologie d'une crise d'Albert le Grand à Jean-Paul II*, L'ordre philosophique (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 358.

doctrine of double truth with which its Parisien adherents came to be associated and for which they were condemned. For him the condemnations, which ultimately encompassed the positions of Albert and Aquinas, pushed scientific autonomy towards the “separatism” now dividing theology and philosophy which Popes Leo XIII and John Paul II found so destructive—we may add Benedict XVI to their number. He concludes:

The paradox is that the vision of John Paul II in regard to the relations between faith and reason, philosophy and religion, erects as a model the strategy and principles of autonomy condemned by the Magisterium in 1277...the condemnations of 1277 have been the most formidable measure of ideological control taken by the Church in respect to philosophy. They forbid Albert the Great’s conception of the autonomy of the sciences, inviting by the same act the movement of separation which the Magisterium proposes today to arrest in making its own the position condemned.⁵³

Les enfants de Billy Graham et de Mecca-Cola are analogues of Bishop Tempier, and those who worked with him to have the positions of the Masters of Arts in Paris, of Albert the Great, and of Aquinas condemned. They threaten the university and *laïcité* in a way analogous to the way the Bishop threatened the university in the 13th century. De Libera pictures the 21st century as “sleepwalking towards a censure worse than any which the Middle Ages experienced.”⁵⁴ By way of these carefully constructed analogues between philosophy’s role within Islam, 13th century Paris, and the Europe and America of the new millennium, de Libera endeavours to help us learn something from what established and what threatened the autonomy of philosophy across the religious divides in the Middle Ages which might be applied to the present conflicts between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

(B-4) *Henry Corbin*

Henry Corbin (1903-1978), like de Libera a married layman, was also a student and professor in the Section for Sciences religieuses of the École pratique des hautes études, where he took full advantage of the liberty it provided from the wars between religion and secularity in France. He studied Medieval Philosophy there under Gilson⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 359.

⁵⁵ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 16.

and from 1954 to 1974 held the position of directeur d'études as the successor to Louis Massignon (1883–1962) of whom he had also been a student.⁵⁶ Massignon was another revolutionary in bringing together the Christian and Islamic philosophical and spiritual worlds and, though like Gilson a fervent Catholic, he knew Islamic philosophy from the Arabic inside, not only through the medieval Latin translations, Gilson's mode and interest. In 1946 Corbin organised the Department of Iranology of the Franco-Iranian Institute in Tehran. There he established and directed the Bibliothèque Iranienne Series, an important collection of editions of Persian and Arabic texts together with analytical studies. If de Libera has become more open to the character and diversity of medieval metaphysics in virtue of being part of the criticism of Heidegger's history of Western metaphysics, Corbin was liberated from the narrow rationalism of Western philosophy by the sage of the Black Forest. Corbin was the first to translate Heidegger into French, publishing in 1938 a collection of texts under the title "Qu'est ce que la Métaphysique?" Heidegger's insistence on the hermeneutical helped Corbin deal with the crucial problem of how what he designated as "prophetic philosophy" could be faithful to both the prophetic revelation and to philosophy. Equally, Corbin's openness to the Neoplatonic multiform syntheses which give continuing life to Iranian philosophy came out of the Heideggerian disclosure that Western metaphysics does not exhaust the history of Being. In consequence, he was one of the very first Westerners to immerse himself in Islamic philosophy with more than an historicist mentality. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a long time collaborator and friend, and the author of *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* published this year, writes of him:

Finally, there came into being... only during the second half of the 20th century, a school that began to study Islamic philosophy as a living school of thought rather than as a matter of purely historical interest. The inner need of Western man for new "existential" knowledge of the Oriental traditions turned a number of seekers to search within the Islamic philosophical tradition for answers to questions posed by the modern world on the intellectual level.⁵⁷

People like Corbin in the West and himself in the East:

began a new type of scholarship in Islamic philosophy, which without sacrificing in any way the scholarly aspect of such studies, turned them directly into the service of the philosophical and metaphysical quest of those contemporary men and women who were aware of the profound

⁵⁶ Corbin wrote the Liminaire for the Annuaire of the V^e Section of the École in 1960-61: "L'École shaykhie en théologie shi'ite." On the connection with Massignon see Pierre Lory, "Henry Corbin: His Work and Influence," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 1149.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

intellectual crisis of Western civilization and were seeking authentic philosophical knowledge elsewhere.⁵⁸

Such actualization cannot be one-sided and Nasr reports that “the last decades of the 20th century were also witness to the gradual penetration into and interaction with Western philosophy...”⁵⁹

One of the first fruits of this mutual penetration of Western and Islamic approaches was the writing of a new history of Islamic philosophy which:

treated Islamic philosophy and its history in a completely different way from other works in European languages and took fully into consideration the rapport between philosophical speculation and revelation in Islam.

The first volume was as a collaborative work between Corbin, Nasr, and Osman Yahya.⁶⁰ Subsequently Corbin completed the work which has been translated into English.⁶¹ Building on the framework laid by Corbin, Nasr has, as I have indicated, erected a modified account of the whole history up to the present. I conclude this section of my paper with two points he makes about this edifice. The first concerns the history of Islamic philosophy itself and sums up the current view:

From its genesis twelve hundred years ago to today, Islamic philosophy... has been one of the major intellectual traditions within the Islamic world, and it has influenced and been influenced by many other intellectual perspectives, including Scholastic theology (*kalām*) and doctrinal Sufism... and theoretical gnosis... The life of Islamic philosophy did not terminate with Ibn Rushd nearly eight hundred years ago, as thought by Western scholarship for several centuries. Rather, its activities continued strongly during the later centuries, particularly in Persia and other eastern lands of Islam, and it was revived in Egypt during the last century.⁶²

The second is in some ways more immediately consequential for us as heirs of this way of thinking the Hellenes invented. When we read Islamic philosophy we discover there characteristics of that from which both the Western and the Eastern traditions developed, characteristics we once knew and celebrated and which we have now mostly forgotten.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁰ Henry Corbin avec la collaboration de Seyyed Hossein Nasr et Osman Yahya, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, tome I: *Des origines jusqu'à la mort d'Averroës (1198)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). For a summary of the new framework, see Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 107-118.

⁶¹ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London & New York: Kegan Paul, 1993).

⁶² Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 108.

What Nasr writes will remind us of a point I have made repeatedly, viz., a great, or even the greatest, problem standing in the way of our comprehending the Islamic tradition is that it would require our making actual again forms of philosophy from which most of us seem to want to escape or ignore. Nasr writes:

Islamic philosophy was born of philosophical speculation on the heritage of Greco-Alexandrian⁶³ philosophy, which was made available in Arabic in the third/ninth century, by Muslims who were immersed in the teachings of the Quran and lived in a universe in which revelation was a central reality... Muslims considered Greek philosophy itself to have been rooted in prophesy, and in contrast to how the West was to view Greek philosophy later, Muslims continued to identify the origin of the Greek philosophical tradition that they were now mastering with revelation.⁶⁴

Indeed at the beginning of his history Nasr offers interpretations of the work of Parmenides, Epimenides, Pythagoras, and Empedocles, interpretations owing a great deal to Peter Kingsley, who looks at ancient philosophy in ways continuous with those of the Neoplatonists, to support the Islamic understanding of the common origins of our philosophic traditions.⁶⁵

C. Histories of Islamic Philosophy since 9/11

A consequence of the attack on the USA on September 9, 2001 is an effort to fill in the chasm of our ignorance about the Islamic world. This scholarly and journalistic enterprise includes new books, or the reprinting of older ones, on Arabic, Islamic, and Jewish philosophy. Historians who languished in obscurity now contribute to a torrent of articles and chapters on figures and periods which formerly attracted no or little interest. These books do more, however, than fill in individual gaps in what we know about the history of philosophy. When Arabic, Islamic, and Jewish philosophy is included in the history of philosophy it has a new shape: there are chapters or sections devoted to philosophy and religion and to philosophy and mysticism. As we have seen when considering the work of Henry Corbin, what has come forward in the last five years has been enabled by developments which preceded the turn of the millennium, and some of what has appeared since 9/11 was in press before bin Laden's attack. Nonetheless, it is striking that what now confronts those seeking to explore philosophy in the Islamic world generally requires that we recognise its connection to religion and mysticism.

Often the connection between these in Islam is shown to have patterns and problematics set by the Neoplatonic mediation of Hellenic philosophy and religion. This is certainly true of the books by Wisnovsky and Nasr I have mentioned already. The same

⁶³ By Alexandrian I suppose he means Neoplatonic.

⁶⁴ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 108.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-5. See Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, Clarendon Paperbacks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

holds for *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity* (2002), edited by John Inglis, in which one of the six sections is devoted to Neoplatonism,⁶⁶ and for the distinguished collection gathered by Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor, *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (2005) with chapters on “Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in translation,” by Cristina D’Ancona, “Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition,” by Robert Wisnovsky, “Mysticism and Philosophy...” etc. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, and published in 2003 has the learning and breadth of spirit one would expect from a work edited by these scholars. The “biblical and rabbinic background,” “the Islamic context,” Neoplatonism, the connection with Sufism (and of Sufism with Neoplatonism) are expertly handled. The massive *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, published by Routledge in 1996, reprinted in paperback in 2001 and again in 2005, which draws on a vast array of leading experts would be a dream come true had the role of Neoplatonism been worked out more exactly. There are whole multi-chapter sections on “Religion, intellectual and cultural context,” “Philosophy and the mystical tradition,” “The Jewish philosophical tradition in the Islamic world,” “Islamic philosophy in the modern Islamic world” and “Interpretation of Islamic philosophy in the West.” While the collection of *Medieval Philosophy*, edited by John Marenbon, first published in 1998 but reprinted in paperback in 2003, is not much more enlightened than is Cambridge generally, nonetheless, the articles by Jean Jolivet “From the beginnings to Avicenna” and by Colette Sirat on “Jewish Philosophy” bring something of French learning and sophistication across the Channel,⁶⁷ and the Neoplatonic necessities are recognised. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A.S. McGrade and published in 2003, does not venture outside Anglophone philosophical scholarship and is as retrograde as one might have feared. Nonetheless, the learned Thérèse-Anne Druart begins her treatment of “Philosophy in Islam” with a section on “Philosophy, religion, and culture.” Antony Kenny’s *Medieval Philosophy* which came out in 2005 as the second volume of his *A New History of Western Philosophy* published by the Clarendon Press is almost as reductive as it is beautifully produced—it has more than thirty pictures—and there is scarcely an old sin against Islamic philosophy it does not reiterate. Still there is a whole chapter on “Philosophy and Faith: Augustine to Maimonides” which contains three pages on Neoplatonism—although one is occupied by a full-page picture of a nude Hypatia on the way to her martyrdom for pagan philosophy! This incomplete survey of works in English, moving from best to worst, demonstrates again how the reshaping of the history of philosophy which would include the Islamic traditions is closely bound up with what we think philosophy is and how it is practised.

Conclusion

⁶⁶ Richmond [England]: Curzon Press, 2002.

⁶⁷ It was published by Routledge.

The most straightforward conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the Departments and Faculties of Philosophy in the Anglo-American world have no right to the unqualified use of the word “philosophy” in their titles. This would be true even if we limited “philosophy” to the continuation of the kind of thinking and spiritual life initiated by the Greeks and practiced in exemplary and foundational ways by Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Virtually none of them include or recognise as philosophy the whole of what was practiced under that name in Greek and Latin antiquity and the Middle Ages or their modern heirs. So far as they were thus inclusive perhaps a very few might call themselves departments of “Western Philosophy,” some are departments of “philosophy as professional abstract theorising for secularised Calvinist universities,” others departments of “philosophy as professional abstract theorising for Roman Catholic universities,” or “philosophy as professional abstract theorising for conglomerate state or provincial universities,” etc. I am not committed to the exact form of these qualified titles so long as we recognise that we need some such qualifications for truth in advertising and for self-knowledge.

Before we could claim for our philosophical activities in this part of the world the unqualified title, we would need to encompass not only the whole Western history in our conception—including what was done under that name during the two millennia from Aristotle to Descartes—but also the philosophical continuation of the Hellenism Alexander spread by means of his imperial conquests undertaken, or at least represented as undertaken, by means of and for the sake of philosophical culture. We need to remember that the ideas and sciences of Plato and Aristotle were discussed and continued in the Egyptian Alexandria, in Damascus, and perhaps even in Kandahar—or at least still further East and North at Ai Khanoum⁶⁸—before they were known in Rome, Paris, or London. The continuity of the Hellenic philosophical tradition in the East makes itself apparent when we recollect that the Aristotelian philosophical sciences came to our Latin West in the 12th and 13th centuries by way most directly of Moslem Spain but indirectly first by way of Christian Syrians (Orthodox and Nestorian) and then by way of Islamic Baghdad.⁶⁹ It was not in the cities of the Mediterranean coast that the texts were translated for use in debate, and the sciences and the wisdom transmitted, but in centers further East and North—the places from which the likes of al-Farabi and Avicenna came. As F.E. Peters puts it:

The student of the Islamic reception of Aristotle continually finds himself looking in the wrong direction. Taught to regard the Byzantine Empire as the final extension of classical civilization, he comes to the study of

⁶⁸ See Frank L. Holt, *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 149-164.

⁶⁹ See Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy*, Oriental Studies 1 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962), 6-8.

philosophy in Islam with the expectation that the two cultures...will commingle where the former has left its deepest mark...⁷⁰

The opposite was in fact the case. Those seeking the crucial Eastern links in the mediation of sophisticated Greek philosophy to us need to swing further East and North before they can turn West and South to Italy and Spain. In our time, those few among us who have cared to know have learned that philosophy did not self-destruct in the East after it educated us. Indeed, it is primarily in Islamic Persia that the forms of association and differentiation between religion, philosophy, and mystical practice which had been developed among the Neoplatonic philosophers of Late Antiquity were continued in modern times. At first the Iranians were moving along a path parallel to the one on which the West was also walking and then we separated the elements which they continued to hold together.⁷¹

Perhaps none of this would matter if we were isolated from one another. Philosophy could then cease to search for universality or the mutual recognition of differing modes of reasoning and remain content with its sectarian character. However, we are, as they say, into one another's faces. At present Europe, America, and what were called the "white Dominions" have convinced themselves that they are confronting in Islam generally and in Iran particularly—the most philosophical of Islamic cultures at present—something deeply irrational. Because the Anglo-American imperium supposes that violent regime change, shock and awe, and bombing back to the Stone Age are the necessary responses to this irrationality, we need to look again at what reason is. As Henry Corbin put it forty years ago in the Preface to one of his works on Shī'ite Iran:

The spatial distances between humans are being more and more reduced in our day, at least if measured in terms of time; concurrently we hear talk of an "acceleration of history." On the other hand, the *real* universes—those by which and for which men live and die, which never can be reduced to empirical data because their secret reality exists before all our projects and predetermines them—those universes, it would seem, have never been so far from being able to communicate with each other, from being penetrable by one another.⁷²

⁷⁰ F.E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam* (New York/ London: New York University Press/ University of London Press, 1968), 41.

⁷¹ In the West the separation took place from both sides, i.e. on the religious side and the philosophical. See my "From St Augustine and St Denys to Olier and Bérulle's Spiritual Revolution: Patristic and Seventeenth-Century Foundations of the Relations between Church and State in Québec," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, in press and L. Cognet, *Crépuscule des mystiques: Bossuet Fénelon* (Tournai: Desclée, 1958), idem, *Post-Reformation Spirituality*, trans P.H. Scott (New York: Hawthorn, 1959), 116-141.

⁷² Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, Bollingen Series XCI:2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), vii.

The fundamental problem for us with penetrating the other to which Corbin devoted himself is that we would have to draw back into what we call philosophy parts of the history of Western thought from which we have struggled to liberate ourselves in order to turn ourselves into what we now are.⁷³ When we condemn the Islamic world as “medieval” and thus irrational, we pass the same judgment on something which we once were—it does not help to point out that it might be at least as accurate to make “Late Ancient” and “Neoplatonic” our abusive epithets. In the current circumstances it will take a good deal for us to be comforted by the Corbin’s conclusion that “the conditions of the⁷⁴ dialogue between Christianity and Islam change completely as soon as the interlocutor represents not legalistic Islam but [Iranian] spiritual Islam, whether it be that of Sūfism or of Shī‘ite gnosis”⁷⁵—the latter being a world with which we can begin a communication in virtue of the Neoplatonism which was the nursing mother of both in their formative periods. In consequence, I reiterate the statement with which I began this paper: There is nothing more significant about a philosophy than how it situates itself within or in respect to the history of philosophy, going on to add: and nothing more difficult for it.⁷⁶

⁷³ For one account of the divide from the 13th century onward, see Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin*, 232.

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⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁶ This paper was originally delivered to the Atlantic Region Philosophical Association Meeting on October 27, 2006 in Fredericton.