

# THE TRADITION OF ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY IN PERSIA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE MODERN WORLD'

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The subject of the present paper is one which, it would seem, involves all men, for men, being a thinking being, cannot avoid thought. In whatever society he lives he is forced to think and meditate upon the nature of things. It is possible to put a false way of thinking in place of a true one, but, in any case, it is not possible to be against thought itself, especially since this point of view, when analyzed and dissected, is found to be itself a certain way of thinking. Man cannot, therefore, escape from thought and reflection, and this is true today in the Islāmic world in particular as well as in the East in general, where men live in a special situation resulting from the encounter with Western civilization as a result of which a new awareness and evaluation of their own intellectual tradition has become an urgent call and, in fact, probably very much a matter of life and death. In Persia the best proof of this fact is that during the last decade, despite all that has been done in many modernized circles to turn away from purely intellectual matters and to become concerned solely with the practical and the pragmatic, there still can be seen a new kind of

awareness of the Islāmic philosophical tradition, even among some of the members of the younger generation.<sup>47</sup>

In this discussion the expression "philosophical tradition" (*sunnat-i falsafī*) has been employed for the reason that the use of the term "tradition" itself, which has become current in Persian recently, is an indication of the present intellectual situation in the Islāmic world. There are two factors to consider. First, the word tradition (*sunnat*) in its present sense in Persian does not have an antecedent in classical Arabic or Persian usage. The concept which the word evokes today has not existed in the same way within the Islāmic intellectual heritage where the word *dīn* has always meant tradition in its universal sense; but in fact this particular word, *sunnat*, has not been employed here without a definite reason. Its usage today in Persian, even in such expressions as "traditional decoration", "traditional food", or "traditional music", etc. points up a two-sided reality. It shows that to a degree the modernized generation in Persia as elsewhere in the Islāmic world has to a certain extent fallen out of its own intellectual and cultural tradition and thus is able to reflect upon it from the "outside". In the same way, in a recent Cultural Seminar held in Tehrān it was suggested that the very fact that the word culture (*farhang*) has come into use in Persian today as a result of European influence shows

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<sup>47</sup> Translated from the Persian by William Chittick. Since this paper was written originally for a Persian-speaking audience, most of its references are to that particular world.

that the unity of culture that existed traditionally in Persia is disappearing. Today usually one begins to speak about "culture" only when one no longer possesses its real substance.

In reality, man can look at himself as a pure object only when he has come out of his own mould. Thus the very fact that today people concern themselves with the "philosophical tradition" of Persia shows that, as a result of contact with Western civilization and in general the transformations which have taken place in the world during the past fifty years, certain modernized Persians at the present time look upon their own past "objectively" as a past "tradition" outside of themselves.

The second factor involved in the use of *sunnat*, which is one of vital importance and concern, is that the development of the West during the past fifty years, after 400 years of revolt against tradition by European civilization, has made obvious, at least to the intellectual élite, the paramount importance and absolute necessity of tradition. This intellectual movement first began in France with a remarkable figure named René Guénon, but now talk of tradition is much more widespread, and some Persians are aware of this development. The very fact that the foundations themselves of a given civilization are crumbling and civilization faces dissolution makes the necessity of keeping up the tradition and of living according to it ever more obvious in the eyes of the

elite. Although the general spiritual decadence of the modern world has gone on with ever greater speed during the past century, the need for tradition and interest in its presentation have become much more keenly felt than during the past century, although genuine interest in this matter has remained of necessity confined to a few. Hence the recent use of the word tradition (as *sunnat*) in the Persian language, which has probably multiplied ten times over the last twenty years, is, indirectly at least, the result of a transformation which has appeared within Western civilization and has forced some people to turn their attention toward and respect intellectual tradition, whether or not they have been connected with tradition themselves. For example, in the nineteenth century Western art critics considered the anonymity of artists, writers or creative personalities in the East as a weakness, while today no one would be able to deny the value of Eastern art merely because the name of the artist and creator of a work of art is unknown. If anything, the bitter experience of this century has demonstrated to men of perspicacity that the respect for genuine tradition, tradition in its universal meaning as a reality that unites man with his divine origin and source and not custom or convention, is absolutely necessary even for the modernists touched by the spirit of the West. The Persians and other peoples of the East are not an exception to this rule. Only the preservation of tradition can help them preserve the coherence and meaningfulness of their lives.

They can no longer appeal to the West an excuse to destroy their own tradition if they are at all aware of what is going on in the modern world.

Tradition in the present context does not mean something which passes or dies, for only that is dead which has no value for man at a given moment. As long as a society's past has value and meaning for it, the society is alive, and this "life" and "death" itself fluctuate over the ages. For example, from the appearance of Mithraism in the third century B.C. until the nineteenth century twenty-three centuries went by, and until the twentieth century, twenty-four centuries. Thus Mithraism should be more forgotten and "dead" in Irān now than during the last century, while in fact this is by no means the case. Today because of the rise of nationalism coming from the West, the modernized Persians pay a great deal more attention to Mithraism than they did in the past century. That is why when we speak about tradition in culture and more particularly in metaphysics and philosophy, we are not speaking only of a temporal relationship. Plato is just as alive today as he was in the fourth century B. C., while Renouvier, whose works were probably being read more than those of any other French philosopher in the year 1890, has now faded into the shadows of history. It can thus be said that an intellectual and metaphysical tradition is always alive in a world that lies above time and space. As long as a nation is alive and the roots of its culture continue to be nourished from the spring of its own traditional cultural life, tradition is like a

storehouse from which nourishment is drawn according to the nation's needs at different moments of its history.

In consequence to speak of the intellectual tradition in Persia linked organically with its past is to speak of a living intellectual school, whether the doctrines concerned be that of an individual like Suhrawardī, who lived seven centuries ago, or Ibn Sīnā, who lived ten centuries ago. The time span involved makes no difference. These and other Muslim philosophers and sages are alive and belong to the present moment of the life of Persians and other Muslims in general, for whom the Islāmic intellectual tradition is alive.

But what is the essential nature of this philosophical tradition? Is it limited to Irān? And if so, what are its characteristics?

Here we meet with the extremely important problem of the continuity or lack of it between two chapters in the history of Persia, that is, the pre-Islāmic and the Islāmic periods. The former of these is itself worthy of a profound discussion, although we cannot concern ourselves with it at the present moment, for here our purpose is not to deal with historical roots, but rather with the analysis and evaluation of doctrines and ideas.

Without doubt a certain kind of profound intellectual tradition of a "philosophical" or rather theosophical type did exist in pre-Islāmic Persia, but within the total world view of

the religious traditions, such as Manicheanism, Mithraism and above all Zoroastrianism, themselves. This combination of wisdom and the religious world view is itself the outstanding characteristic of all the traditional civilizations of Asia, or those civilizations which have taken a set of divine principles as the source for all of their activity, modes of thought and way of life.

After the rise of Islām this "philosophical" tradition of the pre-Islāmic period became integrated into Islāmic intellectual life along with other intellectual legacies. As a result a kind of stage of world-wide dimensions was prepared by Islām, in which the Persians could play an active role. Other ideas and schools of thought, especially Greek philosophy— which itself probably has a profound connection in its origin with the ancient Persian and Indo-European traditions —, concepts which originated in Mesopotamia and India and certain other elements, played their own significant role, in the rise of Islāmic philosophy. But more important than all else was the religion of Islām, which provided the background against which and the principles by which all of these intellectual currents and ideas were brought together, resulting in the formation of Islāmic philosophy.

Many Europeans, unfortunately, because of their strongly prejudiced views concerning ancient Greece, have never admitted that other civilizations also possessed an

intellectual tradition of value and originality, as can be seen in most of their appraisals of pre-Islāmic Persia. This prejudice, combined with a large number of other factors, has prevented the importance of the wisdom of ancient Persia and even to a greater extent the significance of Islāmic philosophy from becoming clear. As a result the West has neglected to study the tradition of Islāmic philosophy in its entirety and because of the great influence that Western writings exercise upon modern Muslims, this has harmed the Muslims and particularly the Persians themselves, for in reality Irān has always been the principal homeland of Islāmic philosophy and it was mostly here that the tradition of Islāmic philosophy continued after the 6th/12th century. If one reflects upon the fact that so many Muslim philosophers hailed from Irān and then considers Irān's geographical area and population as compared to those of the whole Islāmic world, the significance of Irān as the center of Islāmic philosophy becomes clear.

Another important point to be considered is that in the modern period Persians have occupied themselves less with writing works on "philosophy" in the modern European sense than the contemporary scholars of other Islāmic countries, who have written works in Arabic, Urdu, Turkish and English (especially in India and Pakistan). This apparently negative fact has a very positive reason, which is the profundity and deep-rootedness of traditional

philosophy in Irān. The mere fact of the existence of an authentic and original intellectual school has made the presentation of unfounded and insubstantial "philosophies" and ideas which ape the West more difficult. Nowadays, because of the prejudice which exists in certain circles, resulting in lack of attention to the philosophy of Islāmic Persia—and a great deal of this prejudice is the fault of the Muslims themselves — a truncated and in fact ludicrous concept of Islāmic philosophy has taken form in the minds of the modern educated classes of Muslim countries. This fact has placed them at a crossroads which, from the point of view of the future development of Islāmic society in general and Persian society in particular and their future intellectual life, is of extreme importance.

In order to remain a healthy being man has basically no choice but to have a certain direct awareness of himself, and if he also observes other beings he always views their personality in the light of his own existence. In fact from the metaphysical point of view all beings in the cosmos display man's existence. Ordinary men see their fallen nature in other beings, while the man who has reached that degree of spiritual development and transcendence which frees him from the chains of his own ego and the limitations of his own soul sees his spiritual essence reflected in the world about him. In any case seeing others in oneself and oneself in others is reached by way of the knowledge of self. This also holds true for cultures, in the sense that a culture must

have direct knowledge of its own past.. It is true that historical and social developments, contact with other civilizations etc., bring about a certain kind of new understanding of the past, but a culture can never remain healthy and strong by the sole means of seeing its own reflection in the mirror of other cultures.

It is now becoming ever more clear that the problem of the necessity of direct self-knowledge is of serious proportions for all Asian societies and especially the Muslim world. For in so many Muslim lands modernized people now seek to look at themselves from the point of view of the West. Of course, this type of perspective is not prevalent among the common people; rather, it is to be seen especially among the so-called "intelligentsia."

The best proof of this assertion is in the field of art, which as a concrete phenomenon can better serve as an example. It is well known that during the last century, before Europeans began to recognize the value of the Persian miniature, the Persians themselves did not have much interest in maintaining this artistic heritage or preserving the precious results it had produced. In the same way until a few years ago there was no interest in Irān in Qajar style paintings, and most of these paintings were to be found hanging on the walls of coffee-houses. But recently, when the real value of these works was recognized by certain European art critics and the Qajar style was designated as an important school of art,

those same apparently lowly paintings found their way from humble coffee-houses to exhibition halls and were bought and sold at tremendous prices. Such a revival in the appreciation of any nation's art as the result of the application of purely foreign standards shows that in a certain sense the culture of that nation has become unstable in the eyes of those who have fallen under foreign influences and that this class lacks confidence in its own cultural identity. If this continues and spreads, the nation will become afflicted by severe disorder within its social structure and the society, like a mentally ill person who experiences a double personality, will become schizophrenic. Within Muslim society, on the one hand, there will exist people on the lower levels who will not yet feel strange and alien within their own society, while on the other hand there will be individuals on the higher levels who will feel alien to, and completely cut off from, the rest of society, thus causing a kind of disharmony and breach to appear within the community. This is a disorder which has already afflicted to a greater or lesser degree all Asian societies and is making more difficult for them the possibility of correctly evaluating and judging what comes from the outside, that is, foreign cultures and in particular the civilization of the West.

That is why one can say that for the East in general and for the Muslim world in particular a new awareness and understanding of the nature of their own philosophical and intellectual traditions is not just an academic question.

Rather, it is one which involves their future existence, in the sense that for a nation to know where it wants to go it must first know where it is, and this is tied to a complete awareness of its own intellectual past.

However this may be, today in the Islāmic world, in most university circles and among those people who are acquainted with modern Western culture, dependence upon the research and even propaganda of some Westerners concerning Islāmic thought and philosophy determines the views held by most students of the philosophical tradition of Islām. Moreover, the fact that most members of the intelligentsia of the East are acquainted with the world and with themselves from the point of view of the West has resulted in their feeling a certain insecurity concerning their own intellectual past. This does not mean that all of the studies of the orientalists have been carried out because of ulterior motives or on the basis of ill intentions; on the contrary, one can be certain that a considerable number of these studies have been free of any such stains. But in any case, the researches of the orientalists have been made at best with an eye on the requirements of Western civilization which, of course, are not those of the Oriental civilizations.

It must further be pointed out that, as any careful study will show, the shadow of the nineteenth century, when orientalism

became established as a university discipline, is still upon us today. If Western thought at that time had accepted the originality and value of a civilization other than its own, it essentially would have destroyed its image of itself and ceased to be what it was during that period. This vital point bears repetition: today in the Persian language it is said that a particular nation is "civilized", or possesses no "civilization". The word which is employed, *tamaddun*, is a literal translation of the French term used by the Encyclopaedists of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century Western thought finally led to the "fall" of the absolute into time". In fact, Hegel, who finally brought this about, and philosophers like him considered nineteenth century Western civilization to be the final and ultimate goal of man's history, and indeed, to be "civilization" as such. It is true that this view has now been rejected, but in the last century it was to a large degree prevalent and it still has supporters in certain schools.

This type of outlook could not accept that other cultures were truly original and "civilized", unless they were so far from the course of Western civilization and so "exotic" that a certain appreciation of their worth would in no way harm the West — as was the case, for example, with the civilizations of Tibet and Japan, whose recognition in no way prejudiced the deeper motives underlying the researches of the majority of orientalists. But when there was talk of the civilization of Islām and in particular when the problem of thought and

intellectual activity was put forward, the subject become much more delicate. The heart of the matter is here: if the orientalist were to accept that a civilization other than the Western had come into being and been of value independently of the culture and civilization of the West, all the bases upon which European philosophy stood at that time would have assumed a relative character. For, in fact, at that time there was no other "absolute" for the countries of Europe to rely upon than what had come to be known as Civilization with a capital C. Christianity had lost its absolute character in the seventeenth century, so that without this pseudo-"absolute" the foundations of Western civilization would have been destroyed. That is why in their studies and analyses of Islāmic civilization most Western scholars have until recently cut off their discussions with the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. In most general cultural studies and those dealing with intellectual history all the later phases of Islāmic philosophy, Sūfism and theology as well as astronomy, mathematics and medicine are neglected almost systematically.

The problems outlined above have been complicated by a number of political movements in the East in the form of nationalism. For example, there is the case of Arab nationalism in its intense form, where, in order to show that Islāmic civilization declined when the Persians and Turks were dominant, some Arab nationalists have discussed and confirmed in their writings the thesis of the

sudden curtailment of Islāmic intellectual activity which Western authors had advanced, and in this way they have made use of this idea for political purposes. The result of all of these factors has been to make the knowledge of their own culture difficult for modern Muslims, and all of them suffer because of this ignorance. Even in an area like Persian literature, for example, a careful investigation will show that the greater part of the aversion and lack of interest displayed by modernized scholars in Irān today with respect to the literature of the Safavid period and the Persian literature of the sub-continent is a result of the relatively incorrect evaluation and appraisal of this literature by the first Western scholars who wrote on Persian literary history. This evaluation has brought about a change in the taste of a large number of Persians concerning even their own literature, despite the internal and national character of this subject.

A similar situation exists to a greater or lesser degree in a large number of other fields. Within Islām is civilization this is particularly harmful in every way, for one of two things is true. Either we must accept that during a period of seven or eight hundred years Muslims did not think or possess any form of intellectual activity — and if so, then how would it be possible for such activity to return to life after seven centuries? Or, on the contrary, we must accept that we have had an intellectual tradition — and in this case we must recover the resources of

our own tradition and base ourselves on the foundation provided by them.

A country like Irān, which possesses a rich and ancient civilization and culture, faces much more complicated situation *vis-a-vis* its own intellectual traditions than a country which intellectually and geographically has just recently come into existence. Whatever the meaning of such a shallow statement might be, 'entering the twentieth century' in the sense of accepting Western civilization, is quite an easy matter for such a newly established nation and can probably be accomplished, at least from an economic point of view, by bringing together a few of the necessities and luxuries and the external manifestations of contemporary life. But movement and change in a civilization which is solidly buttressed by the heritage of the past is something else. Unlike a country built upon a completely new foundation such a civilization cannot remain oblivious to its own culture. It must bear its weighty legacy wherever it goes or else remain an incomplete being. Moreover, nations of this type are themselves charged with a mission, which in reality is the guidance and leadership of all men in the twentieth century in the light of their living intellectual and spiritual tradition. They cannot simply follow the dangerous course of Western civilization with their hands folded especially considering the fact that the present century is one of a thousand imperfections and deficiencies, and that, if it continues upon

its present course, it is hopeless to expect that civilization in its present form will even enter a new century.

The historical mission of societies in which tradition still survives *vis-a-vis* the modern world is to take seriously their own intellectual and spiritual tradition, and this in fact is something which thoughtful men throughout the world expect of them. European civilization, which in the nineteenth century, because of its absolutist view of Western thought, did not want to accept that the civilizations of the East possessed any originality or foundation of their own, has today put relativity in place of that "absolute". European thought has become relative for Westerners themselves and for the same reason we meet with contradictory value-systems within Western civilization. Whether they want to or not, the more thoughtful elements of this civilization are now forced to accept that the civilizations of the East do possess a certain value and originality in themselves.

Thus it is that the "intelligentsia" of the Eastern traditions finds itself at an extremely difficult crossroads. In Irān, for example, being "Westernized" (*farangī-ma'āb*) at the time of Akhundov was different from what it became at the time of Taqīzādah, and today it is different from what it was then, these three aspects of the same phenomenon displaying tremendous divergences among themselves. Taqīzādah's name is mentioned on purpose, for the life which he lived is a perfect illustration of the developments and changes which

have taken place within the intellectual currents of a single nation over a period of almost a century, during which he himself expressed several different views concerning the civilization of the West, thus showing how the mental climate among the "intelligentsia" of Irān and most other Muslim lands has changed.

Today an individual Muslim — especially since, as has been pointed out, Islāmic civilization is one of the three or four Oriental civilizations which from this point of view possess an intellectual mission for the modern world — cannot erase from his mind his own civilization and culture as easily as he did in the past decades; for the mere mention of the fact that traditional philosophical thought exists in Islām and more particularly in Persia places him face to face with the question of what other intellectual premisses he wishes to base himself upon in order to forget his own authentic and original mode of thought, when Western modes of thought are themselves crumbling.

Here it must be hoped that the light that has come from study and research in East and West concerning the thought and philosophical tradition of Irān — and which will certainly grow brighter in the coming years — will to a degree illuminate the way for the future intellectual development of Irān and the Islāmic world in general. In other words, when young Muslim intellectuals observe, for example, that *the Sharḥ-i Manzāmah* of Ḥajj Mullā Hādī

Sabzawārī has recently been translated into English,<sup>48</sup> they will not be able to maintain the same attitude toward the Islāmic intellectual tradition as did the "intelligentsia" of the past generation. Thus, the awareness which is just beginning to appear around the world concerning the Islāmic philosophical tradition in Irān is itself one of the basic elements which will help determine the future intellectual development of the Islāmic world.

It must now be asked what this intellectual tradition is in itself. First of all, as has been indicated, the intellectual tradition of Islām with its widespread and extensive roots is in many ways unique in the world: among classical civilizations it is only the Islāmic that truly possesses an international and world-wide foundation, for this foundation came into being from the encounter of Chinese, Persian and Indian, Greek and Alexandrian elements as well as the intellectual heritages of most of the other ancient civilizations of the world along with, of course, the Qur'ānic sciences and branches of knowledge themselves. The mode of thought which appeared as a result reached its first stage of perfection with Ibn Sīnā; afterwards great theologians, such as Imām Muhammad Ghazzālī and Imām Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, opened up a new direction, and a further stage was reached with the appearance of the School of Illumination

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<sup>48</sup> By T. Izutsu and M. Muḥaqqiq; Part one of the translation has been published in the Islamic series of McGill University Press. The Arabic text of this work was published by these two scholars in Tehran in 1969.

*(Ishrāq)* founded by one of the greatest intellectual figures of Islām, Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī. Later stages in the development of this tradition were brought about by the synthesis of gnosis (*Wan*), philosophy and theology leading to the flowering of these intellectual movements in the Safavid period with Mir Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, whose school has continued to the present day. These are some of the developments which appeared within Islāmic thought over the centuries, and it is precisely this chain of thought which we have in mind when we speak of the "Islamic philosophical tradition."

Unfortunately, because of lack of extensive research, the particularities of much of this tradition are unknown to us, for at the very least most of the thousands of books written in this field must first have been studied. But a few of the basic principles which can be seen throughout the various stages of the intellectuallife of Islām and in particular in Irān are manifestly clear. Here it is hoped to compare and contrast these principles with the prevalent thought-patterns of the modern world and the problems which modern science and philosophy have placed before man.

The first and most important message of the Islāmic philosophical tradition, which more than all others has drawn the attention of the most penetrating of modern scholars, is that this "philosophy" cannot be learned but must be "realized". Philosophy in the East is not just a school of

thought and an academic discipline; it is also something that must be combined with a "wayfaring", and an inner transformation of man's being. In other words, as first taught, most of all by Suhrawardī, in Islām becoming a philosopher (*faylasūf*) or traditional theosopher (*hakīm*) is joined to the attainment of spiritual and moral perfection.

It is well enough known that one of the elements that have caused the tragedy of modern man is the complete separation between knowledge and ethical principles, in the sense that at the present time there is no relationship whatsoever between moral and spiritual perfection and scientific progress. This itself is the source of immediate danger, even causing one of UNESCO's experts to remark a few years ago, "I wish we were back in the age of the alchemists when science was only in the hands of the elite, and they kept it secret"; for disseminating science in man's present situation is like putting a sword in the hand of a drunken sailor.

Today every "forward" step which man takes in reality widens the gulf between what he is and what he thinks. That is why we are regrettably faced with a severe crisis resulting from the application of the practical aspects of modern science, as is observed, for example, in certain negative and harmful consequences of modern medicine and biology. Thus a complex problem is placed before us: why does the application of science, which apparently is based upon

experiment and the observation of nature, cause man to fall into violent conflict with that same nature, so that it has even become possible that in the end man or nature will be destroyed? Again, this difficult and perhaps insoluble dilemma of modern man derives basically from the split between science and wisdom in general on the one hand and science and spiritual and moral perfection on the other.

To understand why the situation has come to this crisis it is necessary to cast a glance at the history of Western thought and to search for the cause of the separation of Western science and metaphysics. It is true that this separation produced certain positive results and led to the appearance of new branches of science, but its negative aspect is much greater and has resulted in the disappearance of any satisfactory universal point of view. Thus, in the words of one of the greatest physicists of this century, we have a physics, but no natural philosophy which can integrate it into a more universal form of knowledge. Then again, further difficulties are caused by the sort of caricature of natural science which has come into being in the humanities and social sciences in the form of the ludicrous imitation of seventeenth century physics, that is, the constant reduction of quality to quantity and the drawing of a few curves to explain psychological and social phenomena.

Today, then, man is faced with an exceedingly dangerous situation and a chasm which has destroyed the unity of his

existence. Today in a Western university, as well as those of the East which imitate Western models, a student is obliged to study the humanities, natural sciences and mathematics together. In other words, he comes out of his physics class and enters one on literature, and from there he goes to classes on art, and from there to classes on the doctrines and history of religion, without there being any significant relationship between his studies in these fields. This has brought about a kind of "hardening of the arteries", which we in the East must never be negligent of or try to imitate. If we do not take preventive measures and do not attempt to find an immediate solution, within one or two generations we shall be afflicted by the same disorder that has now overtaken the societies of the West and which cannot by any means be taken lightly: separation between wisdom and science, between morals and science and between complete disarray and discontinuity within science itself and more particularly separation between the humanities and the natural sciences, and most of all aversion toward traditional philosophy and metaphysics (leaving aside the few traditionalists alluded to above) which arose out of European history when after Leibniz genuine metaphysics was forgotten. What is called metaphysics today in the West is not true metaphysics except for what is found in the writings of traditional authors like R. Guénon and F. Schuon. Metaphysics in its true sense must always be connected with a way of union with the Truth, whereas the

so-called metaphysics in Western philosophy is made up for the most part, of expenditure of breath and, ultimately, simply mental noises; as Western philosophy itself has been referred to by a contemporary sage.

Moreover, true metaphysics, as it has existed in Islāmic civilization, in the bosom of traditional theosophy (*hikmat*) and gnosis (*Won*), has produced significant scientific results and has been the mother of the traditional sciences. For this reason also the intellectual tradition of Islam is extremely valuable as a guide for today's world. Islāmic civilization is the only one which has been able to produce a mathematician of the highest calibre, who was also a competent poet. It is true that one or two of the symbolist poets of France knew mathematics, but they were never great mathematicians and only knew mathematics as an academic discipline, while, as far as we know, throughout the whole history of science only Khayyām was both a great poet and an eminent mathematician. In addition, probably half of the great scientists of

Islām followed gnostic doctrines, such men, as Ibn al-Bannā' al-Marrakushī, the last great mathematician of the Western lands

of Islām, who was himself the spiritual master (*shaykh*) of a Ṣūfī order; or Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, or even people like Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī and Ibn Sīnā, both of whom had strong inclinations towards Sūfīsm and gnosis.

Here it might be asked what sort of intellectual life was able to bring together in the mind of one person logic and gnosis, or allow a person to write a book like *The Theosophy of the Orient of Light* (*Hikmat al-Isbrāq*, by Suhrawardī), the first part of which is among the most accurate criticisms ever made of Aristotle's formal logic, and the second part one of the most entrancing discussions of gnosis in Islām. How is it possible for these two modes of thought to be integrated together without any feeling of contradiction? It is here that the uniqueness of the philosophical tradition of Islāmic Persia shows itself quite clearly. The other civilizations of Asia, like the Buddhist and the Hindu, gave birth to a pure gnosis of the highest order which in many respects is comparable to that of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Ibn 'Arabī and Hāfiẓ but expositions of the exact sciences and mathematics in the framework of gnosis are to be found most of all in the Islāmic philosophical and scientific tradition.

Here it is possible to object that the Islāmic natural sciences were not like modern science. in a certain respect this is a valid objection, seeing that modern science is transitory and the traditional sciences have a permanent value. But even if we take the point of view of the historical development of science, the scientific activity of each period must be judged according to the culture and civilization that prevailed during it. Today's science also will be rejected tomorrow. Aristotle was the greatest biologist of the fourth century B.C. and Harvey was the greatest physician of the

seventeenth century A.D. just as today a particular person is, for example, the greatest contemporary biologist. In the same manner, Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī was just as much a great mathematician and astronomer in his time as LaPlace in his and Einstein and Poincaré in our own. Thus the value of scientific thought in itself is not related to the simplicity or complexity of a given period's science. Moreover, when a civilization has been able to place scientific thought within a perspective which includes traditional theosophy and gnosis, this possesses the highest significance for to-day's world and especially for us who are Muslims, for it is precisely the separation of science from theosophy and true metaphysics which has brought the world face to face with today's alarming crisis.

Probably the attention which is beginning to be paid to this aspect of Islāmic philosophy in the West derives from the same reason, that is, that on its highest levels this tradition has synthesized reason (*istidlāl*), with all of its most precise requirements and conditions, and illumination (*isbrāq*) and intuition (*dhawq*). Moreover, its expression has never been separated from beauty. A point of basic importance for modern man, with which many scientists have concerned themselves, is that although theoretically modern science does possess an aspect of beauty — to the extent that scientists, especially physicists themselves, are usually attracted to it by the beauty of its theories and speak more of "beauty" than of "truth", presenting a new scientific theory

as "beautiful" — when this science is applied, the result is ugliness. In other words, one of the characteristics of industrial and machine-age civilization is ugliness, and for the same reason beauty has come to be considered a luxury and as something more or less superfluous. In nonindustrial civilizations, on the other hand, beauty has always existed in every aspect of life.

Over the past few years, as a result of the increase in mental illness and the discord brought about by industrial society, a certain number of people have gradually realized that beauty is not a luxury or something extraneous to life, but one of the necessities for existence. This is a fact which Islāmic philosophy and civilization have always confirmed. For example, in the Islāmic world various disciplines have been studied by making use of poetry, not merely because it is easier to memorize difficult and complicated subjects with the help of poetical rhythm and harmony: the *Alfiyyah* of Ibn Mālik, the *Manzūmah* of Sabzawārī, the *Nisāb* and many other works all illustrate the taste and discernment of a people in appreciating beauty by moulding scientific concepts into poetical form. The attempt to achieve beauty by combining science and scientific explanations with poetry does not derive from the wish to simply demonstrate virtuosity. It is rather one of the most important heritages of the intellectual and philosophical tradition of Islām, impossible to accomplish without, recourse to traditional theosophy and gnosis. It is

only the gnostic (*'ārif*) who can both produce mathematics and compose poetry. In other words gnosis is the frontier and only common ground between the two. Until now, without turning to gnosis and achieving, in fact, the spiritual maturity it provides, no one has been able to be the source of original intellectual creations combining both reason and intuition.

The last important characteristic of the Islāmic intellectual tradition which we wish to mention here is its universality. It has never been limited to a particular subject, people or location, but has always been concerned with the highest truths of an unlimited nature as well as with mankind and the world as a whole. In fact, one of the characteristics of Islām, which fortified a characteristic which had existed in Persian civilization from ancient times, has been precisely its international and universal perspective. It is well known that Cyrus the Great was the first person to have granted different nations under his rule the right to follow their own way of life and that the Persians were the first people who did not limit the world to their own borders. This aspect of Persian civilization was fortified by the universal perspective of Islām, so that the character of universalism is a strong feature of all Islāmic philosophy, especially as it developed in Persia.

A great many people now realize that man's future will probably depend more than all else upon his ability to

preserve completely his own religious opinions and beliefs and at the same time to accept the value of those of others. Of course, this is not an easy matter, as is shown, for example, by the fact that the most important barrier standing in the way of Christian thought today is the existence of other religions. This is because Christianity can no longer consider all other religions and faiths to be heathen and astray, as it did in the nineteenth century, when comparative religion first appeared as a field of study. Today as soon as believing Christians see that there are people belonging to other religions and characterized by sincerity and spiritual perfection, they will stand in danger of losing their own faith if they try to ignore the factors which are the cause of that perfection.

Today in the West there is a great deal *of* interest in the study of the history and comparison of religions. It is hard to believe, but apparently the number of students studying comparative religion in American universities is greater than that in most other fields, and is increasing every day. This extraordinary interest is due to the fact that, as Western civilization spreads and cultural barriers are broken down by the external aspects or modernism, Western man's need for immediate standards by which to judge the values of other cultures increases, and without a universal perspective from which to understand the truths of other religions the danger of losing his own faith always threatens him. In the Islāmic world and in most of the other countries of the East this

problem is still hardly perceptible, except in the case of a very small number of people who have had an extremely close acquaintance with the West and have passed through the stages of anguish, hope and despair of the Western intelligentsia. Nevertheless, this is undoubtedly the most important spiritual problem of today's world and in the future will be even more perceptible in the East. Its solution is far more difficult than sending two or three men to the moon, for it involves the faith of billions of human beings.

Let the problem be expressed quite clearly. How is it possible, for example, for a person to remain a Christian and truly accept, with complete sincerity, the truth of Islām? Or how is it possible for a person to be a Muslim and yet accept the verities of Buddhism and Christianity? In the future this problem will be felt everywhere with the same seriousness as it is felt today by a few young people in the best universities of the West. American youth do not, for example, study text on Buddhism without motivation, but rather as the result of a deep need of which many people in the East are probably not aware. That every day in the West new centers are opened at the universities for the study of comparative religion, or Islām or Hinduism, is not for the most part because, in the manner of the nineteenth century, people want to find out about the nations of the East in order to be able to rule them better; rather, it is because of a spiritual

and "existential" need on the part of an important section of the Western intelligensia.

The very life and existence of a reflective and thoughtful student today in the West demands that he become acquainted with the cultural, religious and philosophical values of others. He must either accept their validity and see his own standards become relative, or reject them; he must either live in confusion and without orientation, or try to find another solution. In any case he is forced to undergo a crisis which is probably the most pressing and urgent intellectual problem which man will face in the future, along with the battle between tradition and anti-traditional or secularist tendencies.

In this situation Islāmic philosophy again possesses a message of the utmost importance. Persians in particular are all familiar with the poetry of the Muslim gnostics and Ṣūfīs, especially Rūmī, who turned their attention to the unity of religions and held that God's message has been sent to all. The verse of the Holy *Qur'ān*, "Every nation has its Messenger" (10: 48, Arberry's translation), is likewise a reference to this subject, and no holy book has proclaimed the universality of revelation as much as *Qur'ān*. The doctrine of the inward unity of religions became particularly developed and refined in Irān, located geographically as it was between the Mediterranean world and India. That is why today the Muslims of Persia possess

without their even knowing it consciously not only a philosophy of religions but a "theology" of religions in the Western sense. The possibility of understanding a variety of intellectual, gnostic, philosophical and religious systems and modes of thought exists within their own philosophical tradition.

In one way the above point can be observed in the works of Suhrawardī, who combined the philosophies of ancient Persia and ancient Greece within the framework of Islāmic gnosis and brought into being such works as *Alwāḥ-i 'Imādī* and *'Aql-i Surkh* which in a certain way sublimate and transform the epic narratives of pre-Islāmic Persia into mystical recitals. In another way we see this perspective, as indicated above, in the works of Rūmi, in particular in his *Mathnawī*, and in the poetry and writings of many other Sūfī masters. Modern Persians read and enjoy these works as poetry, and often they unfortunately "profit" from them in a sort of inverse manner by deriving from them a kind of relativity in the face of all sharī'ite injunctions. But the worth of this heritage is much greater than shallow people would understand, for it can be a guide for Muslims in the future to "be themselves" without negating the tradition of others. More particularly it can be of special service to a number of countries besides Persia, whether to the East, where the two religions of Hinduism and Islām face each other, or to the West, where friction exists between Islām and Christianity and even more between Islām and Judaism.

This also, then, is one of the great characteristics of the Islāmic philosophical tradition of Irān, which in the future can be a great intellectual aid for the Islāmic world in general if not for the world as a whole.

To summarize, the purpose of the present paper has not been to analyze in detail difficult philosophical and gnostic concepts, but rather to point out the general lines of the philosophical tradition of Islāmic Persia. The most notable feature of this tradition is that philosophy in its true sense belongs to those possessing a spiritual quality, that is, philosophy in the sense of the ancient Pahlavi wisdom (*kehrad*) and the traditional theosophy (*bikmat*) of Islām, or that philosophy which attaches man to spiritual reality and to truth. All men must think, whether they be physicians, engineers or mathematicians. All must first be human beings, then be experts in their own fields. Thus it is that on the general level which we have been considering the traditional philosophy of Iran belongs to all the intellectual classes of society. Therefore, and if we are to have in Irān and in the Islāmic world in general a university which has a truly intellectual character, we must make use of our own intellectual traditions as background for all fields of study. This applies *mutatis mutandis* to all aspects of the life of the Islāmic world.

Today in the East we are sleeping on hidden treasures. We must first awaken and evaluate them, and only

afterwards go on to acquire new knowledge and sciences. Otherwise the modern sciences which we import from the West, even the natural sciences and mathematics, will never be anything but superficial activities without roots, and even if they do take root their roots will dry up and dessicate the existing culture and civilization. New branches must be grafted onto a living tree, but if the tree itself is not alive and strong no new grafts will ever be possible.

Many of those in the East who speak today of science and knowledge and who as a service to science want to eliminate their own culture with its gnostic, philosophical and religious dimension are either unaware of what is happening or are in fact labouring under a greater illusion about the modern world than the Westerners themselves. Islāmic culture and more generally the traditions of the East will only be able to respond positively to the impact of the West if they are themselves a living entity. It does happen that they are fortunate enough to still have the possibility of remaining alive as themselves, especially wherever there continues to survive a very original and valuable intellectual tradition. God willing, the coming generation of Muslims, by taking their own spiritual and intellectual heritage seriously, will be able to preserve the Islāmic tradition and also cast a light which will illuminate the otherwise dark skies that modern man has brought

into being through forgetfulness of the truth which lies in the nature of things.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The ideas set forth in this essay have been developed more extensively in several of my books including *Islamic Studies* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1966 ); *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968 ); *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge [U.S.A.]: Harvard University Press, 1968 ); and *Ṣūfī Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, forthcoming).