©gg-foto - Al Quaraouiyine in Fez, the oldest university in the world

FREE THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

BY MICHIEL LEEZENBERG

Islam is incompatible with modern liberal democracy, we are regularly told. A view that appears, at first sight, only to be supported by the steady stream of images and messages coming to us we receive from today's Islamic world. Every report on the depressing spiral of increasingly extreme violence in the name of Islam, by groups like Al-Qaeda or ISIS, would seem merely to confirm that Islam is an inherently intolerant, dogmatic and violent religion. Islam, we often read and hear, has not yet passed through an Enlightenment, in which religious dogmas are subjected to philosophical criticism, and in which religious authority (or 'the church') is subordinated to, and kept strictly separate from, a liberal and secular political order ('the state').

This simplistic idea is founded, of course, on a somewhat Eurocentric view of the Islamic world. We tend to take the template of the historical development of Christianity and of Western European secularisation, and lay it over the developments in Islam and the Middle East. For centuries, it is commonly accepted, moral and intellectual life in Western Europe was dominated by the church, and only in modern times were church and state separated, and religion subjected to philosophical criticism by brave enlightened spirits; a process that Islam has not yet undergone.

Unfortunately, this template of a linear and universal process of Enlightenment and secularization betrays an elementary lack of knowledge of Islamic history. In the Islamic world we see precisely a contrary pattern to the Christian one: while in the modern period we mainly see all kinds of violent intolerance and persecution of dissenters, classical Islam has an impressive tradition of religious criticism and philosophical free-thinking. It is about this classical tradition that I want to speak here. First of all I shall present a number of philosophers and free-thinkers from the classical Islamic civilization, after which I shall then briefly discuss their relevance to the present time, and just how important the existence of these free-thinkers is for contemporary discussions about Islam.

For this, we must first jettison the presupposition, or prejudice, that critical philosophical reason is an exclusively European possession. Not only was the critical philosophical heritage of pagan antiquity almost completely forgotten in Europe for centuries; it was also precisely at this time that interest in this heritage flourished in the Islamic world. In Western Europe the urban civilization and learning of late Antiquity had long been wearing thin, but after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, knowledge of the Greek language, sciences, and philosophy was completely forgotten. The only disciplines handed down in early medieval education were logic and rhetoric; but education was prey to general decay. Even the knowledge of Latin became so weak that Charlemagne had a number of reforms carried out in the ninth century to ensure at least a minimum of literacy among Catholic priests. These measures have been referred to by some optimistic historians as the "Carolingian Renaissance"; but they mark only a modest cultural and intellectual revival.

During these centuries, the Islamic world experienced a completely different development. To begin with, a prosperous urban civilization never completely disappeared in this part of the world. In the eighth century, a new city, Baghdad, was founded, to serve as the capital of the Abbasid dynasty. It soon grew to an immense size and enjoyed great economic and cultural prosperity. Cities like Damascus, Alexandria, Cairo and Cordoba were also significantly larger than even the largest cities in Western Europe.

These cities were not only economically prosperous, but they also experienced an impressive cultural and scientific flowering. Various scientists did important and innovative work in mathematics, astronomy and medicine, among others. The religious climate of the classical Islamic world was also remarkably open and tolerant of other religions, and of dissenting opinions inside its own community. Contrary to received wisdom, the rapid Arab conquest of large parts of Western and Central Asia, North Africa and the Iberian peninsula in the seventh and eighth centuries was not accompanied by mass forced conversions to Islam. In fact, the Islamic rulers had a good practical reason to resist conversion: non-Muslims had to pay more taxes. Instead, we see almost the opposite intellectual movement: the new Islamic elites took over all kinds of cultural, political and intellectual elements from their environment without any problems. In this way the early Islamic world displays important continuities with the civilization of late Antiquity. Religiously, the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad presents itself as the completion of the previously revealed monotheistic religion of Jews and Christians. No wonder, then, that Biblical figures such as Moses, Abraham and Jesus are recognized in the Quran as legitimate prophets. Politically, the early Islamic dynasties of the Umayyads and Abbasids considered themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Eastern Roman and Iranian traditions of kingship. And philosophically, the classical Islamic world continued the pagan and early Christian Greek tradition.

No wonder that this time has been described as the 'Golden Age' of Islam. Philosophically, this was definitely a period of Enlightenment: the translation of philosophical work, and the public use of reason, including for criticism of religious revelations and traditions, was not only tolerated by the rulers of the day but openly encouraged. In terms of literature, this time marks a Renaissance, or the flowering of a humanism that formulates moral and cultural civilization not in terms of religious revelation or scholarship, but of literary beauty and

elegance. And also from a religious and philosophical point of view, classical Islamic civilization displays a remarkable freedom of action and thinking. The classical Islamic world had no centralized, hierarchical institutions or persons who embodied religious authority. In theory, the Caliph was both the political ruler and the spiritual leader of all Muslims, but in practice no one paid much attention to his doctrinal ideas. Not only did secular power fall into the hands of local monarchs and military leaders pretty quickly after the rise of the Abbassid Empire; also authority in dogmatic and legal matters soon became the privilege of the *ulama* or learned men - a loosely organized class, or caste, of religious specialists.

Possibly in order to divide and thereby weaken these scribes politically, several secular rulers organized public theological debates or *munâzarât*, where Islamic, Jewish, Christian and other theologians debated the merits of different faiths. Appeals to divine revelation or to religious authority were not permitted in these debates; only logical arguments counted. Incidentally, these debates were not completely 'public' in the sense of being accessible to everyone. During this time, the culture of the educated elite was kept strictly separate from the lives of the illiterate masses. In various classical Islamic authors you therefore find the recommendation to keep the people away from philosophical thinking and theological debates, because this can only confuse them and they can unwittingly fall into heresy or disbelief.

Let us look at a few of the classical Islamic thinkers who emerged from this background of religious pluralism, translations of Greek works of philosophy and public theological debates. Heading the list is Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (died 945), the first philosopher to succeed in reconciling Greek concepts of cosmology and natural philosophy with revealed monotheistic religion. There had been earlier philosophers, notably Al-Kindi (died 873), but their work was less a product of independent and critical thinking than an uneasy juxtaposition of Islamic theological doctrines and Greek philosophical ideas.

In Al-Farabi we see an author who builds, with much greater ease and self-confidence than Al-Kindi, on the philosophical ideas of Plato concerning state structures and government, on those of Aristotle on human nature and the human need for community, and on those of the Neoplatonist Plotinus on how the cosmos works. The details of his work need not concern us here, but his main book, entitled *The Virtuous City*, has one remarkable feature: the revealed religion of Islam,

the Prophet Muhammad, and the text of the Quran play no part in it. Instead, Al-Farabi speaks of religions in the plural, and in general and abstract philosophical terms of the relationship between philosophical thought and religious revealed laws. Even more remarkable is what he writes about that relationship: for him, religious laws are merely rhetorical imitations of abstract philosophical truths, presenting knowledge in simplified form for the common people, who cannot read or write, let alone reason philosophically.

Here Al-Farabi openly declares philosophical reason superior to the religious revelation of laws to prophets. Not even Spinoza went that far in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. It was not until the eighteenth century that in Western philosophy one may hear comparably radical ideas about the relationship between reason and revelation. It is also important to note that Al-Farabi, as far as is known, never had any problems because of his philosophical views. On the contrary, he was – and is – a widely respected thinker who, alongside Aristotle, is held in high esteem as the 'second master' of Islamic philosophy.

Something similar holds for another tenth-century philosopher, Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. 925). As we mentioned earlier, the classical Islamic world had a tradition of public theological discussions or *munâzarât*. These were open debates, not political tribunals or show trials; their content and outcome were not predetermined. It was apparently during one such *munâzara* that Abu Bakr al-Razi reportedly made his notorious statement that all prophets of revealed religions are, without exception, impostors. According to him, the idea that only one nation is chosen for God's revelations is irreconcilable with God's wisdom: this teaching leads only to needless and unjust bloodshed and violence. Al-Razi is thus not an atheist, but rather a deist: he approaches questions of creation and revelation like a philosopher, and from that position criticizes the idea of a more personal and culture-specific god of the revealed religions.

Al-Razi's criticism caused such controversy that centuries later detailed refutations of his views were still being written. The fact that he was combated with detailed philosophical arguments, and not simply cast aside or excommunicated, speaks volumes about the intellectual climate of the time. And he was by no means the only freethinker to radically criticize the major Islamic articles of faith. Another tenth-century freethinker, Ibn al-Rawandi, attacked the dogma that the

language of the Quran is inimitable. He reportedly did so by presenting an imitation of a number of Quranic verses, something which was perceived by his enemies as a parody of the revealed book of Islam. It was also during this time that the so-called Brothers of Purity (*ikhwân al-safa*) were active in the south. These were not a public debating club but a secret society in search of philosophical truth. These anonymous brothers have left behind an immense encyclopaedic body of philosophical writings. Undoubtedly the most famous, and most moving, part of these writings is the famous story of the lawsuit brought by animals against humanity.

From the above it will have become clear that classical Islamic civilization differs radically from contemporary Islam. Religious dogmas were openly debated, the status of Islamic revelation and of the Islamic prophet was openly subjected to philosophical criticism, and persons of power and prestige were publicly mocked without this necessarily leading to persecution or violence. In Al-Farabi and Al-Razi you will find even a more radical criticism of religion than we encounter in Western European Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Spinoza.

Opinions differ as to whether, when and why this critical tradition has disappeared in Islam. One common answer is that later theologians, such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (died 1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (died 1328), fought fiercely against philosophical reason, and in so doing led Islamic civilization into a religious, fanatical and obscurantist slumber, from which, according to some, it has still not awakened. And indeed Al-Ghazali wrote a famous book with the telling title *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Ibn Taymiyya, often presented as the patriarch of today's Salafi and fundamentalist forms of Islam, goes even further in his *Refutation of the Logicians,* in which he disputes the practical utility of Aristotelian logic. But on closer examination, these texts turn out to be based much more on philosophical argumentation than their titles suggest. In other words, even the most radical of medieval thinkers, who rejected Greek-inspired philosophy and logic, fought their opponents with rational arguments, and not with fatwas or threats – let alone physical violence. Philosophical criticism in classical Islam could also be directed against the philosophical tradition itself.

Now you may wonder: all well and good, this philosophy and these critical thinkers in classical Islam, but what good is all that to us today? Which is a perfectly legitimate, and indeed

an important question. Why is the existence of a critical philosophical tradition in classical Islam of any importance to the present at all?

Firstly, because knowledge of this tradition can broaden and improve our image of European culture and ideas. It is sometimes said that Islamic philosophy was only an intermediary: that it had no creative thinking itself, but rendered Western philosophy a useful service by opening up Greek philosophy, and in particular the work of Aristotle, to the Europe of the High Middle Ages. This too is a Eurocentric misconception. Classical Islamic philosophy does indeed include innovative and creative thinking. Moreover, the thinkers of classical Islam obviously did not see themselves as intermediaries concerned primarily with passing on the philosophy of pagan Greek antiquity to the Christian world. Instead, they saw themselves first and foremost as the legitimate heirs to the Greek philosophical heritage and thought, who sought to develop a philosophical view of their *own* world and their *own* time.

The second reason that knowledge of the Islamic critical tradition is useful to the world today is that it can help to debunk the prejudice that Islam as a religion cannot deal with critical thinking and is therefore incompatible with the values and practices of a secular liberal constitutional state. The classical Islamic philosophers and free-thinkers prove that radical religious criticism was indeed possible, and could also be expressed in public. That fact alone makes it impossible to explain abuses in the contemporary Islamic world, or contemporary crimes committed in the name of Islam, in terms of a single and unchangeable essence of "Islam". The Islamic religion has a history just as much as Christianity, with a profound rift between the classical and modern manifestations of Islam on many points.

The third way in which classical Islamic philosophy is relevant to the present is as an inspiration for contemporary Muslims. In today's world, people with an Islamic background in the Islamic world can gain inspiration in many ways from the classical Islamic heroes of the spirit. Whether it be the critical independence of thinkers like Al-Razi and Al-Farabi, the comprehensive historical philosophy of a historian like Ibn Khaldun, or the poetic wisdom and religious tolerance of a poet like Rumi, Islamic thinkers have produced an immensely rich heritage that can guide modern-day Muslims in their daily lives and enrich non-Muslims. In short, a better knowledge of the critical and humanistic traditions in Islam can be of benefit to everyone.

CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

VUB Crosstalks and Moussem set up a lecture series on critical thinking within Islam. In their ideas about Islamic civilisation both Muslim extremists and Islamophobes go back to an originally 'pure' Islam, which was supposedly born 1400 years ago, but in reality did not really exist. Islam was never one block, one movement. On the contrary, it has always been a very diverse culture, strengthened by acculturation and by coming in contact with the Greek, Persian, Indian, African culture etc. A history that is also full of dissidence, heresy and rebellion. These sects and alternative theological currents are at the root of a fascinating culture of debate. Philosophers from the golden age of Islam such as Al Farabi, Averroës, Avicenna, Abu Al Alaa Al Ma'ari Abu Bakr Al Razi, Omar Khayyam, Abu Hayyan Al Tawhidi... are founders of a culture based on reason and science. In today's complex world, attention to these forgotten thinkers is more than necessary.