

Islam as a Civilization

Charles E. Butterworth

Published online: 5 February 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012

Introduction

The attention in the West, especially in the United States, now accorded Islam and those who conduct themselves according to its precepts betrays woeful ignorance of both. As Graham Fuller has persuasively argued in his recent book, *A World Without Islam*, Western culture owes much to Islam as well as to Muslims and would be greatly impoverished had Islam never come to be or were it to pass away.¹ The riches lost would derive as much from the religion as from the civilization to which it has given rise. Both warrant consideration here, the emphasis being on Islam and its genesis and development as part and parcel of a larger Arabic cultural tradition.

The Importance of the Koran

The impartial observer of the Arab Middle East cannot help being struck by the importance of the Koran in daily life and speech. Its hold is almost as great on Christian and Jewish speakers of Arabic as on Muslim. Partial references to Koranic verses punctuate discourse, and it is not unusual for a learned Christian or Jew to display as much familiarity with the book as a

¹Graham E. Fuller, *A World Without Islam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

Charles E. Butterworth is professor emeritus of government and politics at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; cebworth@umd.edu. A specialist in medieval Arabic and Islamic political philosophy, his publications include critical editions of most of the Middle Commentaries written by Averroes on Aristotle's logic; translations of works by Averroes, Alfarabi, Alrazi, and Maimonides; and studies of the political teachings of these and other thinkers in the ancient, medieval, and modern tradition of philosophy.

learned Muslim. Moreover, styles of discourse—as in recourse to effusive greetings and acknowledgment that events may be subject to divine control—testify to its influence. The Koran's own proclamation to be a book sent down for speakers of Arabic rings true in its general acceptance as such, whatever the religious convictions of the individual. Its most direct and challenging declarations set the tone for correct, appealing speech as much as do its recondite and complicated allusions. It is the standard by which attempts at eloquence in Arabic are to be judged.²

The Koran presents itself as the continuation, nay, the fulfillment, of its scriptural predecessors and frequently refers to them as well as to their key teachings and central figures. The references are selective. Of Jewish scriptures, only the Torah is cited; of Christian scriptures, only the Gospels. But the novelties in the portraits offered of Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus prompt deeper consideration of each—especially with respect to what that individual signifies about the way God reaches out to human beings.

Abraham's fearful willingness to present Sarah to Pharaoh as his sister is passed over in silence, and his readiness to offer Isaac as a divine sacrifice is alluded to only in general terms. He is lauded, instead, for steadfast devotion to God and insolent rebuke of his father and family members because of their belief in idols. Indeed, Abraham goes so far as to break all their idols but one—the largest. Then, blaming the deed on the remaining idol, he taunts his kinsmen to ask the other idols who committed this sacrilege. When his kinsmen hesitantly acknowledge that these idols cannot possibly speak, he scolds them for trusting in what can neither help nor harm them (Koran 21:51–71). This Abraham clearly discerns the oneness of God and boldly proclaims his faith in that Being. After the angels and Adam, he is the first to submit to God and is therefore accorded the title of pure Muslim.

Moses is nothing if not curious and practical. Intrigued by the sight of a bush burning off to the side of the path he treads on his way back to Egypt with his family, he walks over to look into the cause of the phenomenon and also perhaps to get some firewood. Somehow aware of a realm beyond the merely human and sensing as he approaches the bush that he may be in the presence of something sacred, he removes his sandals. That cognizance earns him the privilege of being addressed directly by God and charged with

²Indeed, a frequent Koranic challenge is for the skeptic to produce a verse like those found in it; see Koran 2:23, 10:37, and 11:13.

freeing the children of Israel from Pharaoh's despotic grasp. In no way hesitant to perform tricks or miracles taught him by God—casting down his rod so that it becomes a serpent and putting his hand under his arm so that it becomes leprous—Moses nonetheless balks at having to argue with Pharaoh. He fears being hampered by his slow and hesitant speech and thus asks God to allow him to enlist his brother Aaron as an ally. It is these two, then, who negotiate with Pharaoh and these two who share the subsequent blame when the newly liberated children of Israel turn from worship of God to that of the golden calf (Koran 20:9–104). The Koranic Moses receives revelation and guidance from God, rebukes Pharaoh, brings the children of Israel out of bondage, and guides them afterwards—their recalcitrance and ingratitude to God notwithstanding. He is also the only human being in the Koran who is said to have spoken directly with God. But he does not occupy the same rank in the Koranic panoply of prophets and messengers as he does in that of the Torah. The Koran reserves that distinction for the seal of the prophets—Muhammad.

So important is Joseph's graceful overcoming of adversity and fierce adherence to principle that he alone is accorded a whole *sura* or chapter of the Koran.³ It recounts his growth from a naive sense of surpassing his brothers, to awareness of a gift for deciphering dreams, and, finally, to discernment of how to order a whole political community. His physical beauty is emphasized, as is his self-control: attracted as much to his master's wife as she to him, Joseph resists her allure simply because he should. Part of his education alluded to here is learning to use the frailties of others to bring about a more general good. The events recounted, well-known to readers of Genesis, gain new meaning because of the Koran's insistence that Joseph's moral character distinguishes him from others. Recognition that moral rectitude and practical reasoning characterize Joseph more than piety causes the thoughtful reader to pause.

Mary's piety or devotion, however, is her fundamental trait and, vouching for her chastity, confirms her having conceived Jesus as a virgin.⁴ Jesus's unique birth, status as a messiah and messenger of God to the children of Israel, even his having been taken up by God rather than crucified notwithstanding, he is not divine.⁵ Indeed, those who elevate Jesus beyond

³Sura 12. Although Sura 19 is named "Maryam" or "Mary," only a few verses in it have to do with her, namely, vv. 16–40.

⁴Mary's chastity, first lauded in Koran 3:31–44 and again at 19:16–40, is affirmed a final time in 21:91.

⁵See Koran 3:45–63; 4:156–59, 166–75; 5:72–77, 109–120; and 43:57–67.

his role as messenger and ascribe divinity to him, thereby negating God's unity, err greatly. God is not begotten, nor does He beget.

In addition to shedding new light on these figures, the Koran speaks of Adam, Noah, Lot, Job, Jonah, Elias, David, and Solomon—of their particular mission or message and how they sought to persuade their contemporaries of God's presence as well as why He alone should be worshiped. Recounted, too, are similar efforts by messengers and prophets otherwise unknown to us—individuals such as Hud, Salih, and Shu'aib. As the Koran notes, we know of their failure, as we do of Noah's and Lot's, by the remaining traces of their communities that were destroyed by God. The message is clear and precise: God, creator of heaven and earth, demands obedient recognition from human beings and warns them of a day neither to be postponed nor hastened on which their fealty will be judged. To fare well on that day, humans must have trod a straight path—the one for which God offers guidance through the verses of the Koran.

These verses, or *ayat*, a word that also has the meaning of signs, tell human beings explicitly what to do. Moreover, as signs, they provide distinct evidence of God's constant presence and of His creative power. For human beings merely to accept the signs and believe in them is not sufficient; they must also act upon them. Conversely, sound deeds alone are not enough; one must also believe in God as the one supreme being and creator. Reiterated throughout the Koran, this message is common to all believers and provides the fundamental precepts for a teaching of toleration.⁶

Revealed in Arabic so that speakers of that language could not feign ignorance of its message, the Koran was delivered to a particular man. Like messengers of God before him, Muhammad was scorned by some and reviled by others. He also enjoyed enough success that some kinsmen and fellow Meccans waged battle against him. Koranic allusions to such hostilities point to the just reasons for aggression as well as its limits and thus offer guidance for Muslims today as they seek to resist oppression. If retaliation is sometimes warranted, however, refraining from it is more highly praised (2:178–79). In the Koran, moreover, the story of Cain and Abel is set forth precisely as a lesson as to why the murder of one person is a sin against all humans (5:27–34). This movement from the particular to the general

⁶See Koran, Suras 1 and 112 with 2:62 and 108–12 as well as 5:69.

provides instruction that is easy to grasp; it also sheds light on the larger questions about the source of evil and to what extent humans can exercise free will.⁷

These features, plus its unique rhetorical and literary style, contribute to the Koran's special appeal and help explain the unique hold it has on speakers of Arabic even now. The attraction it exerts as a standard for eloquent expression reaches beyond readers of Arabic. In 1143, the Koran was translated into Latin; in 1547, into Italian; in 1616, into German; and then in rapid succession into Dutch (1641), French (1647), and English (1649). The early English version has now been succeeded by at least two dozen others, several having appeared since September 2001. Yet, as important as its rhetorical and stylistic force is, the allusions to the Koran scattered throughout the writings of the historians, novelists, poets, and philosophers who have shaped Arabic and Islamic civilization—especially those aspects known to us in the West—make familiarity with and an awareness of the Koran's teaching central to any discussion of Islamic civilization.

Islamic Civilization as Catalyst and Preserver

Most of what Westerners know of Islamic civilization comes from the historians, philosophers, and scientists who flourished during the Golden Age of Islam, from about 800 to 1400; from the poets thriving during the pre-Islamic period through the Golden Age who gained new prominence in the late nineteenth century that continues to today; and the novelists, some of whom came to attention in the mid-twentieth century, others more recently. While this group includes Alfarabi hailing from Central Asia, Ibn Khaldun from Tunisia, and Averroes from Cordova, it excludes many others from areas and epochs that have not yet drawn the eye of Western scholars simply because Western awareness of Arabic and Islamic culture is sorely limited. Medieval Latin scholastics were the first to explore the culture, prompted in part by a desire to proselytize and in part by intellectual curiosity. Then, for some reason, this interest waned until the early nineteenth century. While the scholarship begun at that time has continued to grow and branch out, there are still many gaps in our knowledge about the intellectual and cultural

⁷For evil, see Koran 2:14 with 30–39 and 6:112; for free will, see Koran, 2:256–57 and 11:118.

history of this massive and rich tradition. Above all, little is known about literary and scientific thought in the period following the death of Ibn Khaldun at the start of the fifteenth century—that is, just after the advent of the European Renaissance—until Jamal al-Din al-Afghani burst upon the scene in the middle of the nineteenth century.

It is evident, nonetheless, that were it not for Arabic and Islamic culture, Western understanding of Plato and Aristotle would be greatly impoverished. Thanks to Alfarabi and Averroes, as well as in some part to Avicenna, we are able to discern just how Plato and Aristotle approached the perennial political and theological questions that seize our attention. Alfarabi's ever so beguiling presentation of Plato's philosophy blames Socrates for his tendency to annoy rather than persuade his interlocutors, especially those who deemed themselves fit to rule, and extols the rhetorical appeal exercised by Thrasymachus. The point is that good rulership consists in combining the blunt wisdom of Socrates with the deceptive charm of Thrasymachus.⁸ As Paul Rahe notes, referencing Leo Strauss, Alfarabi aims at replacing Socrates's problematic philosopher-king who rules openly with a philosopher who covertly seeks to transform the opinions of his fellow citizens.⁹ Use of words and images that evoke Islamic teachings yet never explicitly mention the religion or its key terms draw Alfarabi's readers to consider anew the relationship between faith and reason. Ibn Tufayl, Averroes, and Maimonides clearly understood the political—in both senses of the term—implications of such a procedure. They took it a step further, using it to suggest how the claims of revelation might be subjected to rational inquiry and explanation without undermining the convictions of those not able to pursue such investigations.

Once translated, Ibn Tufayl's tale, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (Living, the son of Awakened), captured the imaginations of many and may have influenced Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* as well as John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. It centers around the way Hayy—who is either self-generated from a lump of clay or, having come into being as are other humans, is plucked from a basket and raised to self-sufficiency on a deserted island by a doe just as Moses was plucked from a basket and raised by a daughter of Pharaoh—deduces on his own, without

⁸See Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato*, in *Alfarabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), sec. 36.

⁹See Paul Rahe, "The Return of Abu Nasr al-Farabi," in *Reason Papers* (forthcoming).

language, the workings of nature and infers the presence of God and His will for humans. When he chances upon a fellow human being and learns to speak, Hayy fervently desires to pass his understanding of God on to other people. Voyaging to the home of his new friend, Hayy fails miserably in his attempt to educate the populace. Knowledge of nature and its causes, even of what is beyond nature, does not suffice to educate others and quicken in them a desire for sound political action. Something more is needed—rhetoric at the very least, perhaps even a touch of the gift Thrasymachus was reputed to have had.

Averroes and Maimonides (who composed his philosophical treatises in Arabic) provide the teaching that eluded Hayy. Each strives to strengthen his co-religionists in their faith while showing how reason can resolve doubts that arise now and again. Averroes, responding to a crisis particular to his time and place, also demonstrates the way rhetoric can serve a sound educational goal. The writings of these two as well as of their predecessors offer guidance to those who seek a deeper appreciation of the competing claims put forth by revelation and reason.

Still, these are not the lessons that drew the attention of the medieval Latin scholastics. They were much more interested in learning about the writings of Plato and Aristotle that had been translated into Arabic early in the ninth century. Then, as the difficulties in these translations became manifest, they turned to the commentaries on these texts—especially on the writings of Aristotle—composed by Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. Commentaries by Alfarabi on several of Aristotle's logical treatises have come down to us and are very helpful, but his commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric* seem to be lost. In addition to his essay on the philosophy of Plato and allusions to Platonic teachings in other writings, Alfarabi's challenging commentary on the first nine books of Plato's *Laws* has been preserved. Avicenna's writings on almost all of Aristotle's writings are readily available, but they are less commentaries on the texts than independent disquisitions on the subject of the particular treatise. He wrote no commentary on any of Plato's dialogues. It is Averroes, the man dubbed "the commentator," to whom we—like the Latins—must turn for insight into Aristotle's writings. In his various commentaries on almost all of Aristotle's writings, Averroes explains why a particular book is ordered as it is, pursues the way Aristotle answers a question differently in one work or another, and points to similar or conflicting opinions offered by the earlier Greek commentators whose works—like those of Aristotle—were not known to scholars until the Renaissance.

Like Alfarabi, Averroes can be a challenging pedagogue. Wishing to follow his *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* with a commentary on the *Politics* and lamenting that no version of the text had reached him—indeed, it is possible that this work never made its way into Arabic—he substitutes for it a *Commentary on Plato's Republic*. As he puts it, Plato's *Republic* resembles the *Politics* insofar as it provides the second part of the science of politics. For Averroes, it would seem, both works show how to bring about in the souls of the citizens the habits and characteristics identified in the first part of the science, that is, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁰

Arabic writings about the physical sciences, mathematics, and medicine are abundant. Indeed, comprehensive medical treatises by Avicenna and Averroes circulated widely for centuries either in their original Arabic or in Latin translation. So, too, did the medical works of Alrazi. In addition to Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, scientists such as Alkindi, Thabit ibn Qurra, and Ibn al-Haytham contributed much to the development of algebra, arithmetic, astronomy, calculus, cartography, chemistry, cosmology, geography, geometry, ophthalmology, and sociology. Yet other scientists from the Arabic and Islamic tradition invented and developed instruments used in navigation such as the astrolabe as well as numerous other scientific and technological tools. The curriculum of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music or harmonics, and astronomy or cosmology) now associated so closely with Latin scholasticism may have originated with the Islamic madrasa system of education.¹¹ Even today, these disciplines constitute the core training for Shiite Muslim clerics in Iran and Iraq.¹²

Two other features of Arabic and Islamic culture must also be noted. One is the tradition of folktales, such as *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*A Thousand and One Nights*), which shed light on the culture in general while pointing out the

¹⁰See Averroes on Plato's "*Republic*," trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 21:8–22:8. The page and line numbers refer to the Hebrew text of E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956). For the issue of whether the *Politics* was known to the Arabs, see Paul Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory under the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 59–66, especially n20.

¹¹George Makdisi explored this question at length in *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh University Press, 1981) and *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

¹²See Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Oneworld, 2000).

challenges to political well-being and to established religious practices that are always present. Best known to English readers through the titillating compilation presented by Richard Burton, the authentic version is more succinct and comprises only 282 nights. But the frame story remains basically the same. King Shahrayar—having discovered first his wife's, then his brother's wife's, and finally a genie's wife's infidelity—concludes that women are not to be trusted and hits upon a self-serving but politically disastrous way to guard against their treachery, namely, marrying a woman for one night and putting her to death on the following morning. His vizier's daughter, the intelligent and clever storyteller Shahrazad, takes it upon herself to teach him how to rule wisely and also overcome potential threats to his kingdom posed by unknown beings and forces.¹³ Tales such as these, whose origins are simply not known, eventually lead to the genre of "Mirrors for Princes" that are echoed in Western civilization.

The other feature is the contribution to architecture manifested in grand secular and religious buildings such as the Alhambra Palace, Great Mosque of Cordoba, Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Ibn Tulun and Sultan Hassan mosques in Cairo, Hagia Sophia and Suleymaniye mosques in Istanbul, al-Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez, al-Qayrawan mosque in Tunisia, and Umayyad mosque of Damascus. And this partial enumeration of the many architectural wonders in the Arab and Islamic world necessarily excludes the wondrous Taj Mahal of Agra, India. Equally beautiful are the famous covered markets of Marrakech, Algiers, Tunis, Damascus, and Istanbul. Carvings from bone and wood, tapestries, pottery, glass, and decorative inlays also constitute part of Arabic and Islamic art.¹⁴ Finally, to return to the beginning, as it were, mention must be made of the way Arabic calligraphy, developed primarily for and displayed so magnificently in the adornment of copies of the Koran, contributes to our human appreciation of beauty.

¹³Muhsin Mahdi unearthed and edited the most reliable manuscript version of the tales, then explained in detail how they grew from a compilation of 282 to that of 1001 nights: *The Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla), From the Earliest Known Sources, Edited with Introduction and Notes: Part 1, Arabic Text* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984); *Part 2, Critical Apparatus, Description of Manuscripts* (1984); and *Part 3, Introduction and Indexes* (1994). Hussain Haddawy's excellent and reliable translation of the tales uses Mahdi's text: *Alf Layla wa-Layla, The Arabian Nights, Based on the Text of the Fourteenth-Century Syrian Manuscript Edited by Muhsin Mahdi* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990) and *The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories* (1995).

¹⁴The documentary, *Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World* (www.IslamicArt.tv), provides a marvelous overview of these and many other examples of art and architecture.

Conclusion

The Koran, like all other scriptures, must be taken on its own terms. As such, it offers deep insights into the human condition—insights that accord with, while shedding new light on, tales and personages Christians and Jews have encountered in the revealed writings known to them. As with any scripture, the Koran must be read as a whole and serious effort made to discern how particular verses contribute to its larger message, however jarring particular verses appear when viewed separately and out of context. Similar insight can be gained from awareness of just how much Arabic and Islamic learning has contributed to Western learning, even to its appreciation of the classical Greek sources to which Westerners had no access for centuries. Their recovery since the Renaissance does not diminish the value of what can be learned from the commentaries of Arab and Muslim scholars nor the discoveries and important insights set forth either in those commentaries or in other treatises. In sum, without Arabic and Islamic learning, Western civilization would hardly be as rich as it is today.

APPENDIX

Syllabus Proposal for “An Introduction to Arabic and Islamic Culture”

This course is limited to fifteen persons. It meets twice a week for ninety minutes and functions as a seminar. In other words, we will meet to discuss a particular reading that each of us is to have read carefully prior to class.

There will be no lectures, and no background reading is assigned. The goal is for us to come to terms with the material on its own rather than through interpretative lenses presented by others. Each session will be limited to discussion of a single reading.

There will be no papers. Grades will be based on an oral examination of the material read during the semester.

Sessions 1–10: The Koran

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Session 1, Sura 1 | Session 2, Sura 2 |
| Session 3, Sura 3 | Session 4, Sura 4 |
| Session 5, Sura 5 | Session 6, Sura 7 |
| Session 7, Sura 12 | Session 8, Suras 20–21 |
| Session 9, Suras 55 and 68 | Session 10, Sura 109 |

Session 11: Imru al-Qais, *Mu'allaqat*

Sessions 12–16: Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*

Session 12, *Attainment of Happiness*

Session 13, *Philosophy of Plato*

Sessions 14–15, *Philosophy of Aristotle*

Session 16, Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness*

Session 17: pause to reconsider preceding material

Sessions 18–23: more Alfarabi

Session 18, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chapter 5

Sessions 19–20, *Book of Religion*

Sessions 21–23, Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms*

Sessions 24–25: Alghazali, *Deliverer from Error*

Sessions 26–27: Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*

Sessions 27–29: Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*

Session 30: Recapitulation