

# A Short History of Islamic Thought<sup>1</sup>

Written by Fitzroy Morrissey

Review by George Warner

Fitzroy Morrissey's *A History of Islamic Thought* addresses itself to a non-academic audience, setting out across 200-odd eminently readable pages the key concepts, individuals, and movements that have shaped Muslim intellectual traditions over the past 1400 years. Twelve chapters take the reader from Islam's origins through to the modernist experiments of the twentieth century, followed by a brief epilogue that brings the book's account into conversation with the present moment. Though the continued, sometimes urgent relevance of the history he narrates is made clear, Morrissey is also careful to affirm that the systems of thought here described are of great value in and of themselves, as vital and venerable records of human interrogation of the profound questions of existence.

That Morrissey manages to narrate the history of such complex material while retaining pace and lucidity is no mean feat. His approach is largely descriptive rather than analytical, forgoing lengthy examinations of impersonal forces and theories to focus instead upon individual figures of significance, deftly introducing the big ideas through (usually) miniature intellectual biographies of their chief proponents. The early debates about the derivation of the law, and with them the fundamental dynamics of balancing reason and revelation, are narrated through the scholarly careers of the four Imams of the *Sunnī madhāhib*, while the life of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb is used to introduce principal beliefs of what later became Salafism. Morrissey's account is further enlivened by the integration of Muslim voices into his assessment of different developments. Historians like Ibn Khallikān

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and Ibn Khaldūn are cited for their insights on events many centuries before their births, while the French occupation of Egypt is described chiefly through the testimonies of Egyptians who witnessed it.

An important success of the book is its balancing of attention between different historical periods. While introductory works on Islam often dwell on a designated “formative” period around the Abbasid era, before leapfrogging the throng of societies that flourished thereafter to arrive at European colonialism, Morrissey’s history follows the continued unfolding of intellectual trends and systems across the centuries. The challenge of Islam’s immense and geographically dispersed diversity is similarly well managed. Not only are good accounts made of different centres of learning from Cordoba to Delhi, but Morrissey illustrates the constant exchange of ideas across vast distances that characterises Islamic history, from the hostile reception of al-Ghazālī’s works in Islamic Spain to the influence in Ottoman lands of a Ḥanafī fiqh manual commissioned by a Mughal sultan.

Morrissey points out early on that most Muslims for most of history have been Sunnī, and correspondingly focuses on Sunnī thinkers, but here again the book keeps a balance, and Shī‘ī intellectual currents are kept in sustained conversation with the broader narrative. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī’s philosophical theology is introduced alongside that of his Sunnī counterparts, and the debates between Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs are juxtaposed with scripturalist and revivalist movements within the Ottoman milieu. Indeed, another strength of the book is the care taken to alert the reader to connections and continuities between the manifold facets of the subject matter, tracking the posthumous influence of figures like al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya, as well as the recurrent importance of concepts like taqlīd, shirk, and the Mahdī. The latter feature is facilitated by the author’s readiness to introduce technical terms from the relevant languages, and terms and names alike are meanwhile transliterated impeccably.

The book’s most consequential choices of emphasis concern its framing as a history not of Islam in general but specifically of Islamic

thought. Accordingly, the bulk of the book is devoted to religious thinkers and their associated institutions, while the historical events that surrounded them are given significantly less airtime than in other, comparable works. Discussion of such seismic changes as the Mongol invasions is kept to the bare minimum necessary for clarity, and even the foundational narratives of the Prophet's life are passed over somewhat briefly, though not to the exclusion of the hermeneutical puzzles that they presented in later centuries. This is nothing less than what the book declares itself to be doing, although occasionally, as when the narrative jumps straight from the policies of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to the Abbasid miḥna, the pace may test uninitiated readers.

At the heart of the book is Morrissey's excellent account of the development of Muslim philosophical theology. Swiftly quashing outdated stereotypes of al-Ghazālī's elimination of philosophy in the fifth/eleventh century, he sets out across four chapters a careful account of the continued prominence, relevance, richness, and development of the synthesis between Ash'arī kalām, Avicennan logic, and the Ṣūfī metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabī. Encompassing, as usual, a plurality of historical contexts, the book is especially detailed in this domain, taking in, inter alia, Ibn Rushd's Aristotelian turn and the Ottoman-era entente between Ash'arī and Māturīdī kalām.

Readers are especially well served here by Morrissey's skilful exposition of the axial concepts at work, from Ṣūfī discourses of fanā' to Ibn Sīnā's proof of God as the Necessary Being (wājib al-wujūd). A recurring point of attention, meanwhile, is the sustained intellectual prominence of philosophical-theological traditions, be it in the regnal ideologies of sultans or through the continued presence of these traditions in the curricula of institutions of learning. This is not generally a book that makes explicit arguments, but here one has a clear sense of Morrissey making the case for the ongoing centrality of these grand systems of thought in Muslim intellectual life into the modern period.

This portion of the book is also surely its most valuable. While there is no shortage of popular works concerning Islam's origins and/

or its modern iterations, books introducing Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and his commentators to the general reader are a rarer phenomenon, let alone those with authors possessing a proper understanding of the subject, and Morrissey's contribution is an especially welcome one on both counts. Though not presented as an undergraduate textbook, it at least matches the quality of many such works, and deserves a place on university reading lists in addition to its appeal beyond the classroom.

As a whole, *A Short History of Islamic Thought* is accurate, informative, and well balanced. Endnotes refer readers to a solid range of up-to-date secondary literature, and factual errors are very rare (al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā's office of naqīb, for example, marked him as representative of the descendants of 'Alī, not of the Twelver Shī'ī community as Morrissey states). If complaints are to be justly directed at such a work, they should be accompanied by suggestions of how extra material might have been accommodated without disrupting the necessary brevity and symmetry that Morrissey's account achieves. While one might very well lament the absence of the Sokoto caliphate or of al-Jāhīz, one might, nevertheless, stop short of insisting that their inclusion should take the place of some existing component of the book.

Forging ahead in spite of this caveat, a thematic point that does deserve interrogation concerns the author's inevitable decisions regarding what constitutes Islamic thought. Part of this rests on definitions of the "religious"; pursuits that have occupied myriad Muslim thinkers over the centuries, but which are sometimes classed as extraneous to religion in other contexts, such as linguistics and literatures of manners (*adab*), are seldom mentioned, presumably for such reasons of taxonomy. Similarly, the slippery continuum between religious and political discourses engenders a coverage that can look uneven, with the dynamics of imperial power at work in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires receiving far more attention than those operating in earlier polities.

A further, more significant dimension of how Islamic thought is defined concerns the delineation of where Muslims have been at their

most thoughtful. Though, as noted above, this is not a book that makes many overt arguments, the weighting of its contents makes fairly clear that it is in the work of figures like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī that Morrissey locates Islamic thought's centre of gravity. His account of this tradition is a very fine one, but this focus does divert attention from other aspects of Muslim intellectual life over the centuries, aspects wherein, I would suggest, Muslim thinkers have been no less ingenious. Morrissey allots space to hadith scholars, to religious law, and to messianic movements, but such domains are not treated in the same depth as are metaphysical matters.

The sophisticated debates of Islamic jurisprudence regarding the nature of certainty, for instance, are not discussed, nor is much attention given to such core animating questions as why the legislative aspect of revelation (and with it the shari'a) were and remain so important, what kinds of encounter with the past and with history are enacted in hadith literature, and why a religion founded on the finality of its prophet often appears so interested in messiah figures.

It may be objected that such questions are less explicit in the source material than the enquiries of philosophers, and would thus require a different, perhaps less accessible kind of book. Regardless, their absence affects not just an editorial choice but a consequential evaluation of the subject matter.