

## IN MEMORIAM

### Muhsin Mahdi (1926-2007)

Professor Muhsin Mahdi, James Richard Jewett Emeritus Professor of Arabic at Harvard University, died on July 9 in Brookline, Massachusetts, after long illness.

Universally acclaimed as the doyen of medieval Arabic and Islamic philosophy, Professor Mahdi was born June 21, 1926 in Kerbala, Iraq. He pursued his early studies there, completed the last two years of secondary school in Baghdad, and received an Iraqi government scholarship to study business administration at the American University in Beirut. The attraction of philosophy was such that he fulfilled the requirements for a major in both subjects. After a year as a lecturer in economics at the University of Baghdad, Mahdi won another government scholarship to study economics at the University of Chicago.

Shortly after arriving at Chicago in 1948, he began to study with Arnold Bergsträsser, Yves Simon, and, especially, Nabia Abbott and Leo Strauss. Economics gave way to philosophy, and Mahdi entered the *Committee on Social Thought*. He finished his Ph.D. studies in 1954, publishing his dissertation shortly afterwards as *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophical Foundation of the Science of Culture*. After an interlude as a visiting lecturer at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, Mahdi assumed positions in the Law College and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of Baghdad.

In 1957, he returned to the Department of Oriental Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago where he remained until 1969, when he moved to Harvard University as the James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic, a position he held until his retirement in 1996. At Harvard, he served as director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

Professor Mahdi conducted postdoctoral study and research at the University of Paris and University of Freiburg im Breisgau; was a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellow and a Fulbright research scholar in Morocco; and held visiting professorships at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, the American University in Cairo, the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan, the University of California-Los Angeles, and the University of Bordeaux. He was a member of Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies Advisory Council, founding member and president of the *Société Internationale pour l'Histoire des Sciences et de la Philosophie Arabes et Islamiques (SIHSPAI)*, and founding member and Board member of the Middle East Studies Association.

He served on the editorial boards of *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy: A Historical Journal*, the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, *Hamdard Islamicus*, and *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*. He was president of the American Research Center in Egypt and was the first corresponding member of the Cairo Academy of Arabic Language. In later years, he spent a great deal of time in Paris, where he lectured at the Institut du Monde Arabe. Less than a month before his death, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the American University in Cairo.

Thoroughly versed in ancient Greek, medieval Jewish and Christian philosophy as well as modern Western political philosophy, Muhsin Mahdi acquired an incomparable command of the Arabic language in its many historical and geographical manifestations. He grounded himself in the well-established methods of critical editions of manuscripts developed by European scholars and formulated similarly rigorous standards for research in Arabic and Islamic philosophy. Early in his career, he searched for and found long lost manuscripts that he graciously shared with fellow scholars. He is especially known for the recovery, edition, translation, and interpretation of many of Alfarabi's writings. Indeed, in his 2001 *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* he demonstrated decisively how Alfarabi altered the Arabic-Islamic tradition.

A demanding and inspiring teacher, Mahdi emphasized meticulous analysis and interpretation of philosophical texts in Arabic. He worked closely with students from the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States, several of whom met to honor him at the time of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and then published a collection of essays in his honor, *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*. With Ralph Lerner of the University of Chicago and the late Fr. Ernest Fortin of Boston College, he co-edited *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, containing selections in translation from Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin. He is famous for his critical edition of the *1001 Nights*, especially for proving that they consist only of 282 nights, and for his painstaking account of how 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist scholars falsely expanded the collection. In April 2005, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University organized a conference in his honor on this theme: The Arabian Nights, Eastern and Western Vantage Points.

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