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Islamic Problems and Perspectives in Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract: Contemporary philosophy of religion is excessively Christianity-oriented. This field can become richer and more diverse if its focus is widened to also include the philosophical problems and perspectives with which the followers of other traditions are concerned. Through introducing the papers selected for the fourth issue of *Religious Studies Archives* on Islamic problems and perspectives in philosophy of religion, the present paper highlights the fact that the Islamic tradition provides a rich source of issues that are worth investigating by philosophers of religion.

The present paper introduces the fourth issue of *Religious Studies Archives* on Islamic problems and perspectives in philosophy of religion. The issue collects some of the best philosophical articles ever published in *Religious Studies* that are related to Islam. To clarify the exact scope of the papers selected for this issue, I need to spell out how a philosophical research project could address Islam and/or the Islamic tradition. I hope that my discussion can shed some light on the significance of a largely neglected approach to the study of Islam in contemporary philosophy.

'Islam' could be understood broadly as referring to a set of beliefs and practices which were revealed to/introduced by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) but have been subject to various interpretations by Muslim thinkers in a diverse spiritual-intellectual tradition germinated in the Prophet Muhammad's time and extended to the present. There are many foundational doctrines that Islam share with other religious traditions, especially Abrahamic ones. Thus, if a philosophical research project engages with one of such doctrines, even from a general perspective, it would still be indirectly and partially about Islam. For instance, consider the doctrine that there exists an ultimate being in which all other existents are ontologically grounded. Describing Allah as the ultimate ground of reality, Islam shares the aforementioned doctrine with many other religious traditions. Thus, every philosophical project which addresses this doctrine is at least to some extent about Islam. But it is also related to all other religions with which Islam shares the doctrine in question. Therefore, such a relation to Islam is non-exclusive and indirect (i.e., through the mediation of a feature that Islam shares with other traditions). Obviously, many papers published in *Religious Studies* are indirectly related to Islam in the explained sense. But the papers selected for the present archive issue are supposed

to be about Islam and/or the Islamic tradition in a more direct and exclusive sense. In particular, each of them satisfies either of the following conditions:

> (1) It philosophically engages with a problem that is exclusively related to (or raised by) Islamic beliefs.
> (2) It relies upon either Islamic beliefs or at least theoretical perspectives developed in the Islamic tradition to philosophically engage with a problem about religious beliefs, regardless of whether or not that problem is exclusively Islamic.[1]

To clarify how these criteria can be satisfied, consider the following examples. A paper which philosophically engages with the question of whether or not the Quran can be counted as the Prophet Muhammad's miracle satisfies the first condition. This is because such a paper addresses an exclusively Islamic issue. On the other hand, a paper which discusses the problem of the existence of God either based on the argument-like passages that one might find in the Quran/Hadith or by appealing to the philosophical frameworks developed by prominent Muslim thinkers like Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, and Averroes satisfies the second condition. This is because the problem of the existence of God is a general religious problem that is related to not only Islam but also other religious traditions like Judaism and Christianity. But if a research project investigates this general problem from a particular Islamic perspective, then it would of course be related to the Islamic tradition.

One might wonder why I have not chosen for this archive issue a simpler and less complicated title like 'Islamic Philosophy', 'Islamic Philosophy of Religion', or 'Philosophy of Islam'. My main problem with the first alternative is that if we adopt the common understanding of the scope of this title, it includes philosophical works which have nothing to do with religious beliefs. In the categorization of philosophical subjects and disciplines, 'Islamic philosophy' is usually taken as referring to the study of the philosophical works, insights, and ideas produced by Muslim philosophers. In this sense, even a research project on, for example, Avicenna's arguments against mathematical Platonism would lie within the domain of Islamic philosophy; while such a project may not touch on anything related to religious beliefs (e.g., beliefs regarding the existence and nature of deities). Again, one might believe that everything in the world is religious and, consequently, pertinent to religion in a broad and indirect sense. But this is definitely not how the terms 'religious' and 'religion' must be understood when we are talking about religious studies and philosophy of religion, differentiating them from other disciplines (e.g., philosophy of mathematics). Thus, my main reason for avoiding the title 'Islamic Philosophy' is that, according to its common use, this phrase can be employed to describe works which have nothing to do with religion and religious concerns.

Even more confusing is that 'Islamic philosophy' is sometimes so broadly interpreted that it includes the study of the works of non-Muslim philosophers who have lived in the Islamic world, that is "the geographical areas that have fallen within Islamic political and cultural control, from the rise of Islam down to the present".[2] It is due to this not so uncommon construal of 'Islamic philosophy' that many scholars would find no surprise in seeing papers about the ideas of, for example, Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī (Christian

philosopher died in 974 in present-day Iraq) or Maimonides (Jewish philosopher died in 1204 in present-day Egypt) in a collected volume on Islamic philosophy.[3] But I am reluctant to describe every philosophical work in the guise of Arabic language as a work about Islam or the Islamic tradition. Even if we endorse a non-literal understanding of the phrase 'Islamic philosophy' and categorize the Arabic writings of non-Muslim philosophers as parts of the heritage of Islamic philosophy, it does not mean that such works meet any of the conditions (1) and (2).

My hesitation about using the phrase 'Islamic philosophy' also stems from the fact that this phrase is usually taken to be almost synonymous with 'the *history* of Islamic philosophy'. I believe that the plausibility of (at least some) Islamic doctrines can be philosophically examined in isolation from how prominent Muslim philosophers have dealt with these doctrines in previous centuries. And a publication which includes such a philosophical engagement deserves to be described as a work in Islamic philosophy, or so it seems to me. For the same reason that a philosophical defence of, for example, the doctrine of Trinity is taken as part of Christian philosophy regardless of whether or not it is based on the views of historically important Christian figures, a philosophical defence of, for example, the doctrine that the Quran includes God's literal words must be understood as falling within the scope of Islamic philosophy regardless of whether or not it addresses the theories of revelation developed by the protagonists of the history of Islamic philosophy.[4] But the common understanding of the phrase 'Islamic philosophy' hardly allows such a work to be categorized as a work in Islamic philosophy. To see this better, we can have a look at the papers published in the most prominent journal whose title includes the phrase 'Islamic philosophy'. To the best of my knowledge, there cannot be found even a single paper, published in the *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* which philosophically engages with an Islamic doctrine without having anything to do with the history of Islamic philosophy. And I think this is mainly because an article in which the author develops her own argument for/against an Islamic doctrine is not usually recognised as an article in Islamic philosophy. There seems to be an unwritten consensus that no philosophical discussion about an Islamic belief can ever be dehistoricized (or, more precisely, detached from the history of the discussions around that belief). However, I think that we should promote a more comprehensive, more tolerant, and more diverse conception of philosophical discussions about Islam which include history-independent discussions as well as history-dependent ones.

My final (though fortunately least important) concern regarding the title 'Islamic Philosophy' is that there are still people (fortunately, not too many) who old-fashionably emphasize the historical distinction between *kalām* and *falsafa* in the Islamic world to keep all the theoretical investigations about Islamic theological beliefs distinct from philosophy. I did not choose the title 'Islamic Philosophy' to avoid sending the wrong signal that I have excluded philosophical papers on Islamic theology to those people who understand Islamic philosophy as having a strict boundary with Islamic rational theology.[5]

I do not like the title 'Islamic Philosophy of Religion' either. It is much less confusing than just 'Islamic Philosophy'. But it might still leave the wrong impression that the focus of the present collection is confined to the engagements of Islamic philosophy (in one of the misleading senses explained above) with the problem of religious belief. However, I think that philosophy of religion as a philosophical discipline can in principle have broader interactions with the Islamic thought.

The least problematic alternative title which comes to my mind is 'Philosophy of Islam'. However, I did not choose this title for two reasons. First, one can consistently take this title as referring only to the philosophical engagements with exclusively Islamic problems. Therefore, one might expect that a work in the area of philosophy of Islam must necessarily satisfy (1). But as I said, in this issue, I am concerned with philosophical papers which satisfy either (1) or (2). Second, like the two preceding alternatives, 'Philosophy of Islam' might overly sound pro-Islam. It could leave the impression that the papers which criticize Islamic beliefs are intolerably ignored. But nothing in the selection criteria expressed by (1) and (2) automatically excludes the philosophical projects which argue against the plausibility of Islamic beliefs.

Contemporary philosophy of religion is excessively obsessed with discussions for and against various interpretations of Christian beliefs.[6] Taking into consideration problems and perspectives raised or developed in other religious traditions can help philosophers of religion to diversify the field. This diversification can be developed in many different aspects and directions. First, the fundamental doctrines of other religions can be philosophically examined, defended, or criticized. Second, the general problems of philosophy of religion which do not exclusively belong to a specific religion can be addressed from perspectives of non-Christian religious traditions and/or by employing philosophical tools and theories developed in such traditions. Third, the first two things can open up ways for more extensive philosophical dialogues between different religions (and specially between Christianity and less influential religions in the field). Such dialogues can enable philosophers of religion to grasp a more comprehensive and more sympathetic understanding the different religious view they hold. And this in turn can significantly contribute to providing the theoretical infrastructure of a more diverse and more tolerant world.

Like all other philosophical activities, the aforementioned engagements must aim at a deeper understanding of matters and, in the end, at truth. Sometimes appealing to the history of philosophy helps us to get closer to these goals more easily, and sometimes not. That is why I do not see any necessary connection between the philosophical investigation of Islamic beliefs and the engagement with the history of Islamic philosophy. It is based on these observations that I chose (1) and (2) as my selection criteria for papers related to Islam. However, there are only about twenty articles published in *Religious Studies*, during its almost 65-year history, that meet either of the proposed two criteria.[7] This means that only less than two percent of the articles of one of the most prominent philosophy of religion journals have been about the second most

followed religion of the world. This on its own suffices to convince us that the field is undiverse and imbalanced with respect to different religious traditions. Fortunately, this pattern is changing. And the most visible sign of this change is that, in the last few years, the number of articles about Islam that are accepted for publication in *Religious Studies* each year are significantly increasing.[8] Despite this positive sign, there is still a long way to go for philosophy of religion to become a balanced and diverse field in which all religious traditions are sufficiently taken into consideration. One of the main purposes of this issue is to draw the attention of philosophers working in mainstream philosophy of religion to the overlooked potentials of the inclusion of Islamic problems and perspectives in their philosophical studies. If this goal is achieved, it can make a contribution to accelerating the diversification of the field of philosophy of religion, or so I fervently hope.

Now it is time to briefly introduce the six papers selected for this archive issue. The first paper is John Bowker's 'The Problem of Suffering in the Qur'an'.[9] Bowker examines the Quranic understandings of evil and suffering and compares them with the most popular accounts of these issues in Christianity. According to his analysis, "whereas in Christianity suffering occurs as a problem *principally* because it conflicts with the assertion that God is love, in Islam it occurs *principally* because it conflicts with the belief that God is omnipotent."[10] The main claim of Bowker in this paper is that the problem of evil is raised for different reasons in Christianity and Islam. The existence of evils in the world is challenging for a Christian because it seems to be in tension with the Christian conception of an all-loving God. There seem to be instances of cruel evils in the world in which it is difficult to see any sign of love. By contrast, the source of the problem for a Muslim is that the existence of evils is in tension with the Islamic conception of God as an omnipotent being who controls everything and from whom everything comes for some purpose. There seem to be instances of pointless evils in the world in which it is difficult to see any divine purpose. Recent literature on the problem of evil considers this problem as a problem for theism in general. The significance of Bowker's paper is that it draws our attention to the fact that this problem can in principle be presented under different guises in the context of different religious traditions and may receive different solutions as well; solutions that are acceptable in the context of one religion but controversial in another.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's 'Self-Awareness and Ultimate Selfhood' is the second paper selected for this archive issue.[11] In this short paper, Nasr discusses the distinction between the self (or soul, which is the knowing subject) and the Ultimate Self ("which is Infinite and Eternal and which is none other than the Transcendent Reality beyond"[12]). Relying on Islamic mysticism, Nasr argues that the self on its own, isolated from the Ultimate Self, can never know the true nature of things. It is only through its ontological association with the Ultimate Self that the self is knowing, or so Nasr contends. His account of the self is radically different from the accounts we find in, for example, contemporary analytic philosophy of mind and philosophical psychology. But if, as Nasr claims, this view stems from Islamic mysticism and is compatible with the Eastern

religious traditions (i.e., Buddhism and Hinduism), then it is worth being the subject of future studies in philosophy of religion.

'Notes Towards an Ashʿarite Theodicy' is the third paper selected for this collection.[13] In this paper, Gary Legenhausen resorts to the Ashʿarite conception of God to develop a theodicy in response to the problem of evil.[14] He argues that if one endorses divine command theory or any other meta-ethical theory according to which God's moral obligation is not the same as people's, then one can consistently defend the idea that it is not morally wrong for God to allow avoidable evils. Legenhausen believes that his approach has significant advantages over the theodicies which state that all evils of the world are necessary for greater goods. He believes that the amount of evil in the world is so massive that it is implausible to assume that an omnipotent God cannot create his desired good without at least some of the evils existing in the world. Moreover, it is not clear at all what could be the good which cannot be achieved without such a huge amount of evil that exists in our world.[15]

It seems indisputable that the most important argument for the existence of God in the Islamic tradition is the so-called Proof of the Sincere that was originally proposed by Avicenna and was subject to many criticisms and revisions by later Muslim scholars.[16] But classical Muslim philosophers have offered other arguments for the existence of God that have not received as much attention as Avicenna's argument but are not necessarily less convincing. One of such arguments is Averroes's teleological argument that is discussed by Taneli Kukkonen in the fourth paper selected for the present issue.[17] Kukkonen shows that Averroes considers the fact that things in the world are wisely planned to function as a witness for the existence of God. Kukkonen defends Averroes's argument against the potential charge of having anthropocentric commitments and tries to reconcile it with the principal elements of Averroes's philosophy. The argument in question has important aspects in common with modern arguments from design. But it has still many unexcavated corners and subtleties, or so it seems to me.

The fifths paper selected for this issue has a critical approach towards the standard understanding of traditional Islamic theology. In his 'Some Ruminations About Inculpable Non-Belief', Imran Aijaz puts forward five different objections to the traditional account of non-belief according to which there cannot be any inculpable non-resistant unbeliever.[18] Aijaz agrees with J. L. Schellenberg that there are cases of inculpable non-resistant non-belief. Although the target of his argument is any traditional theology in which the possibility of inculpable non-belief is rejected, he discusses the view of Islam (as the religion with which he is most familiar[19]) in more detail. He contends that "[o]n a straightforward and traditional reading of the Qur'ān, one sees that, according to the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung*, there is no such thing as inculpable non-belief."[20] He then argues that this reading must be revised because it is not compatible with the undeniable fact that inculpable non-belief exists in our world. A crucial element of Aijaz's defence of the existence of inculpable non-belief is his criticism of the so-called *sin defence*. According to this strategy, those instances of non-belief which appears

inculpable and non-resistant are in fact due to cognitive defects caused by sin (or, in general by various type of sinful and, consequently, culpable actions). To challenge the sin defence, Aijaz appeal to a generalized version of Hick's argument for religious pluralism. In the same sense that Hick's argument aims to show that the followers of other religions can in principle be as religiously advantaged as Christians, Aijaz argument aims to show that unbelievers can in principle be as inculpable and non-resistant as believers. This is of course something that traditional theologies do not accept. That is why we should move towards revisionary theologies, or so Aijaz suggests.

The last paper selected for this issue is Moti Mizrahi's 'If Analytic Philosophy of Religion Is Sick, Can It Be Cured?'[21] Mizrahi first argues that "the fact that most analytic philosophers of religion are Christian theists is 'unhealthy' for the field because such philosophers are unable to evaluate arguments in APR without being influenced by their religious beliefs."[22] He then claims that the cure of this problem is diversifying the field by involving the philosophical concerns of the followers of other religious traditions in the central debates of the field. In particular, he focuses on Islam and tries to convince his audience that "Islam is a fertile ground of philosophical questions and arguments for analytic philosophers of religion to engage with. Engaging with questions and arguments couched in non-Christian terms would help make work in APR more diverse and inclusive of religions other than Christianity, which in turn would also be a first step towards attracting non-Christians to APR."[23] An interesting aspect of Mizrahi's paper is that he imitates the structures and patterns of some famous puzzles of mainstream Christianity-oriented philosophy of religion to formulate some worth discussing philosophical puzzles regarding Islamic beliefs. To give an example, he articulates the following argument for the incompatibility of the omnipresence of God with the Islamic belief that it is necessary to pray in the direction of Mecca (and to make a pilgrimage to Mecca):

1. Either Mecca is a holy place or it is not.
2. If Mecca is a holy place, then God is not omnipresent.
3. If Mecca is not a holy place, then there is no need to pray in the direction of Mecca (or make a pilgrimage to Mecca).

Therefore,

4. Either God is not omnipresent or there is no need to pray in the direction of Mecca (or make a pilgrimage to Mecca).[24]

Such puzzles, on the one hand, helps Christian philosophers to explore the nature of divine attributes from Islamic perspectives in order to obtain a more general and more comprehensive understanding of them. On the other hand, they motivate Muslim philosophers to contribute to the field philosophy of religion by providing solutions for these puzzles and defending their beliefs. All this makes this field much richer and more diverse. Mizrahi's paper is a good candidate to close the present issue of *Religious Studies Archives* with because it highlights the main motivation behind preparing this collection:

To draw the attention of philosophers of religion to the richness of Islam as a source of worth exploring problems and perspectives.[25]

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Notes

[1] Many of the papers on the so-called Kalām Cosmological Argument satisfy the second criterion. However, I did not select any of them for this issue because the number and qualities articles about this argument that are published in *Religious Studies* are so high that it seems to be more appropriate to dedicate an independent archive issue to this argument.
[2] Adamson (2015, 1). To be fair, Adamson himself is cautious enough to distinguish 'Islamic philosophy' from 'philosophy in the Islamic world'. However, he does not seem to have any reservation to use the former phrase to refer to the works of Muslim philosophers regardless of whether or not their focus is on a religious issue.
[3] See, for example, the article by Griffith (2017) about Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī's *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*.
[4] Moreover, a philosophical paper which criticizes the doctrine of Trinity but at the same time indicates how the rejection of this doctrine can be compatible with being Christian must be taken as part of Christian philosophy. Similarly, a philosophical paper which criticizes the doctrine that the Quran includes God's literal words but at the same time indicates how the rejection of this doctrine can be compatible with being Muslim must be taken as part of Islamic philosophy, or so I think.
[5] In this regard, I am sympathetic to the view defended by Adamson (2017).
[6] See, among others, De Cruz and De Smedt (2016).
[7] This assessment is only about research articles published in this journal. The review essays which introduce books about Islam are put aside. It is also worth mentioning that, unfortunately, none of the articles about Islam that are published in *Religious Studies* so far are written by female scholars. This clarifies why I have failed to select any articles by female scholars for the present issue of *Religious Studies Archives*.
[8] This assessment is based on the online versions of the accepted articles, regardless of whether or not they are put in printed volumes so far. According to the online records, during the last 18 months before today (29 July 2021), four papers about Islam are published on the website of *Religious Studies*.
[9] Bowker (1969).
[10] Bowker (1969, 186); emphasis in the original.
[11] Nasr (1977).
[12] Nasr (1977, 319).
[13] Legenhausen (1988).
[14] Legenhausen has published many of his later publications under the name 'Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen'.
[15] See Legenhausen (1988, 263–64).
[16] On the various possible interpretations of this argument see Zarepour (n.d.).
[17] Kukkonen (2002).
[18] Aijaz (2013).
[19] Aijaz (2013, 405).
[20] Aijaz (2013, 405); emphasis in the original.
[21] Mizrahi (2020).
[22] Mizrahi (2020, 560).
[23] Mizrahi (2020, 562). 'APR' abbreviates 'Analytic Philosophy of Religion'.
[24] Mizrahi (2020, 569).
[25] I am thankful to Bakinaz Abdalla, Martin Pickup, and Yujin Nagasawa for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. This issue of *Religious Studies Archive* is published in partnership with the Global Philosophy of Religion Project at the University of Birmingham. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or the University of Birmingham.