

# BOOK REVIEWS

*A Guide to Philosophy: The Hidayat al-Hikmah of Athir al-Din al-Mufaddal Ibn 'Umar al-Abhari al-Samarqandi*, Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2009, 338 pp. ISBN 978-967-978-968-3.

As Alparslan Acikgenc underlines in his forward for the book “the history of Islamic philosophy is a rich field of philosophical schools, ideas and doctrines developed throughout the centuries by many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars”. Al-Abhari’s book is just one example of this tradition which is a fruit of interest in recent decades on the historiography of Islamic philosophy. Syed Ali Al-Attas Tawfik is aware of this “revival” and he is proposing to shed new lights on a field neglected even by natives, that is Muslims themselves for a long time.

It seems that al-Attas tries to utilize a framework to understand al-Abhari and his philosophy within a system thinking. To achieve his aim, he understands philosophy as “the science which discusses systems and system related inquiry”. Then, it is not difficult to see that al-Attas has in his mind the idea of philosophy as a process opening many windows to see the whole within a time frame. It also presupposes that Islam as a religion based on the idea of “burning for knowledge” from early days, which triggered a process that led to the birth and development of philosophy and scientific spirit among Muslims. Then, it is important to remember Franz Rosenthal’s observation that Islamic civilization founded and formed on concept of knowledge (*‘ilm*). Franz Rosenthal observes in his seminal book *Knowledge Triumphant* that the *Islamic civilization* “is essentially characterized by knowledge (*‘ilm*), for *‘ilm* is one of those concepts that have dominated *Islam* and given *Muslim civilization* its distinctive shape and complexion” (Rosenthal, 1970).

Then, he embarks to propose “a theoretical framework for the rise of a civilization” and how it stimulated and triggered “the rise of sciences and philosophical activities” in the formative period of that civilization. Then to articulate his thesis as “the unifying element among civilizations” and proposes that it is “the framework” through which one can find “the explanation for the rise of philosophy and science in that civilization”. And this position, leads us to the concept of “worldview” as the major motif and deriving force shaping a particular mind-set and a totally different way of looking at the universe as well as ourselves.

Although the causes for this dynamism (may) vary greatly among civilizations, it is no doubt for al-Attas in the case of Islamic civilization it is the Qur’anic weltanschauung. Saying this, it is not difficult to see and sense the impact and vision of Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in the making of the whole project through his works and also talks with the author.

We should therefore welcome the gesture of a specialist in medieval Islamic literature as he enters the arena armed with deep knowledge of the classical sources. That is what Al-Attas Tawfik undertakes to do in his book on al-Samarqandi. Doing so, it seems it supports heartfully Acikgenc’s argument there used to be a misperception of Islamic philosophy by Orientalists, although some of them have spent at least half their scholarly life scouring hard-to-understand classical texts, argue that “Arabic Philosophy began by al-Kindi, [through the Greek translations] reached its height with al-Fârâbî and Avicenna, suffered the disastrous shock of the criticism of al-Ghazâlî, and made a heroic effort to rise again with Averroes (Ibn Rushd). That is all.”

Therefore, to study Athir al-Din al-Mufaddal ibn 'Umar al-Abhari al-Samarqandi (d. 663/1265) seems very plausible and meaningful as he was a good example of a period when “Islamic Aristotelianism was still at its height despite al-Ghazâlî’s severe criticism”. Al-Attas compares, contrasts, and then summarizes, although briefly the *Hidâyah*, with the *‘Uyun al-Hikmah* of Ibn Sina and the *Maqâsid* of al-Ghazali without elaborating on the distinguishing characteristics of each text in terms of ideas. Therefore, his well-known book the *Hidâyah al-Hikmah* “A Guide to Philosophy” may serve our purpose of deeper and fresh understanding of the period and shed light on dynamic nature of Islamic philosophy, if there are any.

Another important point to be observed is the author’s views on the origin of Abhari as there is “a tendency on the part of the writer or writers to introduce notions pertaining to nationalism and ethnicity” which is no doubt a product of the Great French revolution of 1789 and how it infected the Muslim’s perception of themselves in classical and modern times. Although al-Abhari, like other pioneers of Muslim philosophy, “did not mention or make reference to either his ethnic background or to his political allegiance” with the birth of nation-state. However, modern generations of Muslims never tired off to find the origin of famous thinkers, such as Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, and Rumi, instead to delve the depth of their legacy and how to unearth and understand it in the name of Persian, Arab or Turkish nationalism. As the author makes it clear that, in fact it would suffice for al-Abhari and other Muslim’s sages to say that they were Muslim Philosophers-Scientists.

Before “to show the significance of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah*”, he briefly discusses “the time and the milieu the Scientific Process took place in the Islamic civilization”. Doing so, he reminds us Kuhnian paradigm shift and how it shapes a scientific tradition.

The central idea of the book is “to elucidate one of the more heretofore unknown works on thirteenth-century philosophical texts of the Avicennan genre entitled the *Hidâyat al-Hikmah* (Guide to Philosophy), composed by the prominent philosopher, logician, astronomer, and mathematician Athir al-Din al-Mufaddal ibn 'Umar al-Abhari al-Samarqandii, more commonly referred to as al-Abhari (d. 663H/1265CE)”. But when taken as a whole it is not difficult to grasp the tacit message of the book that Islamic philosophy has been vibrant in different parts of Muslim lands and the Guide to Philosophy is an illustrative example.

To date, as far as we are aware, there has been no complete translation from Arabic to English of Aristotelian physics. Apart from being we believe, the only translated work of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah* in its entirety, it will also be one of the first renderings into English of Avicennan Physics as developed by the Muslims. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, this present manual was an extremely popular and extraordinary work, as the commentaries and super commentaries will attest, which was used as a textbook by the *madrakah* system for hundreds of years. This is another indication relative to its importance. Unfortunately, although the vast number of commentaries and super-commentaries has exposed the study of this book to the Arabic speaking milieu, the lack of a translation and critical edition of this book has hampered its proper study for English speaking.

The book comprises four chapters excluding the Introduction. The Introduction tells us about Abhari's life and works. As expected from such a new book of a neglected era, the introduction tries “to familiarize the reader with key concepts integral to understanding what ‘Islamic science’ is, and how it relates to the worldview of Islam”. In addition, the intellectual milieu surrounding the period before the author was born is woven into a sketch of his life and works. As the “information about his life is largely vacuous”, the author, “based largely on reasonable logical deductive methods, reconstructs, what he believes to be a near accurate depiction of his life. However, it cannot be seen as a mere translation; it offers a rich source material both on Abhari and his works, but particularly on the *Hidayat al-Hikmah*. It also deals with Abhari's sources, reviewing all the available commentaries and super commentaries on the *Hidayat al-Hikmah*.”

In this manner, the first chapter is ready to discuss the general questions concerning the *Hidayat al-Hikmah*. It deals mainly with three topics. First, the intellectual milieu preceding

al-Abhari, which can be read as an outline of Islamic philosophy of that epoch. Second, the significance of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah* in Islamic philosophical literature, which can be seen as a proof that Islamic philosophy was vibrant at the time, and third the textual analysis of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah*. Therefore, it is very informative to any new student of Islamic philosophy to see the whole picture within a relatively short chapter.

The second chapter shows the significance of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah* in Islamic philosophical literature. The next two chapters introduce the translation of the *Hidayat al-Hikmah* and the original text in Arabic. It is important to observe that al-Attas departure for new base for Islamic philosophy and arguing that we have to understand the full-fledge impact the Islamic worldview which transformed the mind of early Muslim generations is important. As a result of his thesis, he does agree with the late Professor Fazlur Rahman who argued that “Ibn Sina was the philosopher who had constructed a full-fledged philosophical system, on an Aristotelian-Neoplatonic basis, with an inner cohesion that sought to satisfy both the philosophic and religious demands.” However, al-Attas dissatisfied disagrees with Rahman's statement, as it implies that “the fundamental basis for Ibn Sina's philosophical system is Aristotelian-Neoplatonic”, as it ignores or give a secondary place to the “fundamental elements of the worldview of Islam”.

Al-Attas position would lead to a new understanding of Ibn Sina which refutes the argument that “Ibn Sina held the tenets of philosophy above that of Islamic doctrine”. He argues that “Ibn Sina was the philosopher who had constructed a full-fledged philosophical system based primarily on the fundamental elements of the worldview of Islam, adopting certain Aristotelian-Neoplatonic doctrines that appeared to complement truths contained in those fundamental elements”.

To conclude, I agree with professor Açıkgenç that *A Guide to Philosophy: The “Hidayat al-Hikmah” of Athir al-Din al-Mufaddal ibn 'Umar al-Abhan al-Samarqandi* would “reveal later philosophical thought in Islam especially following al-Ghazzali's critique of Aristotelian philosophy”. Therefore, it is a great value for any students of Islamic philosophy in West and East.

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