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Decolonization or Islamization? A Reply to Toroghi and Noghani

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In their article, "A Philosophical Explanation for the Islamization of Philosophy" (2024) Amir Rastin Toroghi and Vahideh Fakhar Noghani offer a compelling argument for rethinking the conceptual foundations of the "Islamization of knowledge" by drawing on Mullā Ṣadrā's transcendent philosophy. The Islamization of knowledge is an intellectual and cultural project that seeks to reinterpret, reframe, or reconstruct "secular" knowledge through the epistemological and metaphysical principles of Islam. Emerging prominently in the post-colonial Muslim world, especially through figures like Syed Naquib al-Attas, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ismaʿil al-Faruqi, and later thinkers in the Islamic world, the project responds to the perceived secular, Eurocentric, and value-neutral assumptions of modern knowledge systems. At the heart of the debate lies the question: Can philosophy and science be "Islamized" without undermining their rational and universal character?

Weak vs. Strong Account

According to Toroghi and Noghani, the views of Muslim thinkers in the Islamization debate can be categorized into two accounts: the weak account and the strong account. The "weak account" is based on the distinction between the "context of discovery" and the "context of justification" (these expressions go back to the works of Hans Reichenbach and Karl Popper), which allows Islamic sources such as the Qurʾān or Hadith to inspire philosophical inquiry (discovery), but insists that justification must adhere to secular or universal standards of rationality. Religion may motivate questions, but it cannot serve as a source of evidence or authority in philosophical argumentation.

The "strong account" is attributed to thinkers influenced by Mullā Ṣadrā's transcendent philosophy, which challenges the strict separation between discovery and justification. It maintains that prophetic revelation, grounded in presential knowledge, constitutes a valid and even superior epistemic source. Religious texts can serve as premises in philosophical argumentation and provide epistemic certainty, thereby enabling a deeper integration of reason and revelation.

It is important to note that these different accounts reflect distinct epistemological assumptions on the part of the thinkers in question. For instance, those upholding the weak account affirm the authority of modern rationality while, to some extent, marginalizing the revelatory sources of Islam. This approach also seeks to preserve the autonomy of philosophy but risks severing it from Islamic metaphysics. By contrast, proponents of the strong account, including Toroghi and Noghani, question whether modern epistemology is truly universal or whether it rests on unacknowledged metaphysical commitments foreign to Islamic thought. Viewed from this perspective, the Islamization debate is not merely a methodological concern but a civilizational and epistemological challenge—one that inquires how Muslims might reclaim intellectual sovereignty without abandoning the universal aspirations of reason and rationality.

What sets this article apart is its epistemological emphasis. The authors foreground the distinction between conceptual knowledge and presential knowledge (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*), affirming

that the latter—epitomized in prophetic intuition—is the highest and most certain form of knowledge. Drawing from Mullā Ṣadrā's ontology, they argue that knowledge is fundamentally a mode of presence or being. Since revelation is a manifestation of perfect presential knowledge, it becomes a legitimate and necessary foundation for philosophical reasoning. A particularly illuminating case study in the article is the contentious issue of bodily resurrection, which classical philosophers such as Avicenna struggled to demonstrate using philosophical reason alone. By contrast, Mullā Ṣadrā, according to the authors, maintains that true philosophical inquiry must be guided by revelation and cautions that relying exclusively on rational methods leads one away from truth. He attributes the shortcomings of earlier philosophers regarding bodily resurrection to their neglect of revelatory sources.

Which Reason? Whose Revelation?

I am largely sympathetic to the authors' argument and their methodological reliance on the Sadrian paradigm. However, two critical issues remain underexplored. First, the article does not clearly delineate how complex terms such as "reason" and "revelation" have been interpreted across Islamic philosophical traditions, not to mention how our understanding of the former has been skewed in the wake of the Kantian epistemological revolution. Second, the authors rightly gesture toward the post-revolutionary Iranian context of their discussion, but the broader global discourse surrounding the Islamization of knowledge—or what I have preferred to frame as the decolonization of the Muslim mind—remains largely implicit (see Faruque 2024a). Let me address each of these issues in turn.

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, reason may refer to logical inference, to a sacred faculty, or even to spiritual illumination, as found in Illuminationist and Akbarian thought. But Islamic thinkers such as al-Ghazālī and ʿAyn al-Quḍāt also talk about "the stage beyond reason" (*al-ṭawr warāʾ al-ʿaql*). In relation to the reasoning faculty, the stage beyond reason is as the soul is to the body (ʿAyn al-Quḍāt 2022, §185). What the article fails to bring out is how "reason" is closely intertwined with "intuition," particularly in post-classical Islamic philosophy, which was profoundly influenced by the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabī (Faruque in press).

I also take issue with their translation of *shuhūd* as "intuition," a term more accurately translated as presence and witnessing. In Sufi epistemology, *shuhūd* belongs to a cluster of related concepts, including *kashf* (unveiling), *dhawq* (taste), and *qalb* (heart). Importantly, *shuhūd*, along with *kashf* and *dhawq*, signifies a direct apprehension of reality, in contrast to conceptual or scientific knowledge. It is similar to the difference between knowing the chemical composition of honey and actually *tasting* it.

More generally, after Ibn ʿArabī, one can distinguish between two types of *kashf*, namely 1) *kashf ṣūrī*, and 2) *kashf maʿnawī*. *Kashf ṣurī* or formal unveiling refers to mystical illuminations that are received from the imaginal realm (*ʿālam al-khayāl*)[1] and perceived through the five

[1] The imaginal realm is the intermediate world between the physical and the spiritual world.

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senses. Its examples include seeing spirits (*arwāḥ*) in corporeal form. It also occurs in the form of audition, such as the Prophet Muhammad's hearing of revelation (*waḥy*) in metered speech. *Kashf maʿnawī* or spiritual unveiling, on the contrary, refers to spiritual meanings and universal realities that are obtained from the fountainhead of the divine names and attributes. It occurs in ascending degrees through the following media (al-Qayṣarī 2006, 1:135–139; Mullā Ṣadrā 2005, 1:241–245):

> i) Thought/Thinking (*fikr*): occurs as the manifestation of meanings in the reflective faculty without the use of premises and syllogisms. It can thus be called intuition (*ḥads*) in the technical philosophical sense.
>
> ii) Reason/intellect (*ʿaql*): occurs in the rational faculty (*al-quwwat al-ʿāqila*) in the form of flashing light. Intellect or *ʿaql* is a spiritual faculty which does not inhere in the body and employs the reflective faculty. Intuition or *ḥads* is a flash of its light because the reflective faculty is corporeal, so it becomes a sort of obstruction for the light that reveals meanings from the higher worlds; this is the lowest form of spiritual unveiling.
>
> iii) Heart (*qalb*): occurs in the form of inspiration or *ilhām.*
>
> iv) Spirit (*rūḥ*): occurs through spiritual witnessing (*al-shuhūd al-rūḥī*).

Thus, it becomes evident that both reason and intuition form a continuous epistemic chain, beginning with logical analysis and discursive thought and culminating in the direct perception of spiritual truths (Faruque forthcoming). Once this epistemic structure is in place, I do not object to the term "intuitive knowledge," insofar as it implies transcending the limitations of the physical senses and discursive reasoning, while not denying their respective utilities. From this perspective, Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy indeed demonstrates how "intuition" complements logic and rational inquiry in the pursuit of understanding God, the cosmos, and the nature of reality, provided one is actively engaged in self-cultivation and spiritual purification.

For Ṣadrā, philosophy is a graded concept in the sense that it enables one to progress from one level of philosophical understanding to another. Thus, his transcendent philosophy accommodates discursive reasoning while simultaneously transcending it through higher modes of intellection such as unveiling (*kashf*), illumination (*ishrāq*), and witnessing (*shuhūd*). Although Ṣadrā is by no means opposed to the specific legal notion of *taqlīd* (imitation), he is firmly opposed to the blind adherence to tradition or custom, or the repetition of arguments without genuine intellectual comprehension. His methodology thus is highly critical of the *akhbāriyyūn* (scripturalists) of his time, who rejected all forms of rational inquiry, including philosophy and philosophical Sufism (Faruque 2016).

Put another way, Ṣadrā's philosophical project seeks a middle ground between Sufism, philosophy, and religion, without underestimating the significance of any of them. He urges the reader not to take his statements as "the result of unveiling and tasting or blind imitation

of religion, without going through the process of intellectual proofs and demonstrations and the rules they entail" (Mullā Ṣadrā 1990, 7:326). He maintains that intuitive knowledge without philosophical demonstration is an insufficient condition for truth, just as mere discourse without intuition is a serious deficiency.

This is all well and good, but problems arise when we turn to the details. Consider the issue of bodily resurrection. Despite Ṣadrā's inclusion of religious texts as premises for demonstrating bodily resurrection, his successors continue to debate whether he was ultimately successful in doing so. For many, this remains an unresolved issue. Moreover, the demonstration of bodily resurrection relies less on the mere incorporation of scriptural texts and more on how one understands the psycho-spiritual development of the soul. That is, according to Ṣadrā's Sufi-influenced eschatology, the more the soul perfects its mode of existence, the more the body becomes refined and subtle, and the more intense its attachment to the soul becomes. As the soul continues its journey after physical death, it enters the imaginal realm, in which it takes on an imaginal body (Faruque 2024b). In a word, the issue hinges on how we interpret scriptural conceptions of "body" and "soul," rather than assuming that Islamization entails a harmonious union of reason and revelation.

A Balanced Perspective

To illuminate the stakes of the complex relation between reason and revelation, it is instructive to briefly discuss how the issue of whether it is human reason (*ʿaql*) or scripture that should be given priority concerning the ambiguous verses in the Qurʾān. In addressing the challenge of interpreting ambiguous verses in the Qurʾān, al-Ghazālī classifies exegetes into various categories. He begins by noting that, at a superficial level, it may appear that reason and revelation are in conflict. Those who engage with this issue have traditionally fallen into three overarching camps: (1) those who focus exclusively on scripture, (2) those who rely solely on reason, and (3) a middle group seeking to reconcile the two. Within this middle group, Ghazālī further identifies three subcategories: (a) those who prioritize reason and view scripture as secondary, often neglecting its study; (b) those who center scripture and downplay the role of reason; and (c) those who regard both reason and revelation as equally essential and endeavor to harmonize them.

It is this last subgroup that al-Ghazālī endorses. In his view, they rightly affirm that no real contradiction exists between reason and revelation. To reject reason is, in fact, to undermine religion itself, for it is only through reason that the truth of revelation can be established. Without reason, we would be unable to distinguish a true prophet from a false claimant, or truth from falsehood. Thus, reason, on some level, is indispensable to religion, and its denial amounts to a denial of the very grounds upon which religious truth is known (al-Ghazālī 1992, 15).

The theologian al-Rāzī builds upon al-Ghazālī's arguments. To be sure, al-Rāzī's privileging of reason over scripture reflects his indebtedness and loyalty to the ʿAsharite worldview. In line with the general ʿAsharite position, al-Rāzī maintains that it is through rational argumentation that one establishes: (a) the existence of the Creator along with His attributes

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and acts; (b) the prophethood of Muhammad; (c) the possibility of miracles and their function in confirming the truthfulness of a prophetic claim; (d) that Muhammad is indeed a prophet because he performed miracles; and (e) that the Qurʾān is the word of God.

For al-Rāzī, when an exegete encounters a Qurʾānic verse whose literal meaning appears logically untenable, none of these foundational truths are undermined. Rather, al-Rāzī contends that one must either interpret the verse allegorically or entrust its meaning to God. In his view, appealing to the literal sense of scripture in such cases would amount to rejecting the authority of reason—reason that, after all, is the very means by which the truth of revelation itself was established. Naturally, this would result in the negation of scripture as a whole (al-Rāzī 1993, 193–194).

In a polemical rejoinder, Ibn Taymiyya challenges this framework by arguing that if reason validates revelation, then denying revelation entails denying reason itself, which is a contradiction (Ibn Taymiyya 1981, 170–171). But this response rests on sophistical reasoning. Al-Rāzī does not claim that revelation as a whole is invalidated when a specific verse is given an allegorical interpretation. His position concerns how to interpret certain verses in light of rational necessity, not whether revelation is true. Ibn Taymiyya's conflation of the particular (allegorical interpretation of a specific verse) with the universal (rejection of revelation) misrepresents al-Rāzī's position and collapses the nuance of theological discourse. Perhaps Ibn Taymiyya or those who follow him would do well to remember Rumi's famous distinction between reason (i.e., partial intellect) and the intellect because the former often confuses people:

> The partial intellect (*ʿaql-i juzʾi*) has given the intellect a bad name. Desire for the world has made man desire-less for God.[2]

For our purposes, it is important to note that both the arguments and counterarguments in this debate rely on the use of reason. That is to say, even when one opts for a literalist interpretation of scripture, one cannot entirely evade the normative authority of reason. In other words, the fideist position, represented by figures such as Ibn Taymiyya, essentially becomes self-refuting. In my reading of Islamic philosophy, the reason why a broad spectrum of Muslim philosophers saw no contradiction in indigenizing and transforming Greek philosophy is that they already recognized the sacred origin of reason, whose highest expression is the intellect—corresponding to *nous* in Platonism. That is, from their perspective, there is no such thing, contrary to the proponents of the weak account, as the secular standards of rationality.

If one accepts a cosmological framework in which both reason and revelation originate from the universal intellect, then it becomes evident that revelation constitutes the objective pole of this intellect, while the human intellect or reason represents its subjective pole (with the caveat that "reason" is fallible). Fundamentally, however, both revelation and intellect emanate from the same higher source. From this vantage point, the very meaning of

[2] Rumi, *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, V: 463, cited in Rustom (2013, 193).

"revelation" is altered. Hence, many Muslim thinkers distinguish between the written Qur'an (*al-qurʾān al-tadwīnī*) and the cosmic Qur'an (*al-qurʾān al-takwīnī*).

For example, Ibn ʿArabī refers to the world as the "great text," while al-Nasafī explains that the natural world is one of God's books, in which each day unfolds with its own chapters, verses, lines, and letters for human beings to reflect upon. The renowned 15th-century Ottoman Sufi and philosopher Shams al-Dīn Fanārī, whose exegetical work *ʿAyn al-aʿyān* represents a synthesis of philosophy, mysticism, and Qurʾānic commentary, draws parallels between levels of existence, consciousness, divine speech, and Qurʾānic meanings.

A Different View of Islamization

According to such an expansive and pluralistic understanding of both reason and revelation, the very concept of Islamization takes on a different meaning. Islamization is no longer concerned merely with harmonizing scriptural truths (in a narrow, theological sense) with sources perceived as external to Islam, such as Greek philosophy or modern knowledge. Rather, the overarching aim of both scripture and philosophy becomes the pursuit and exposition of the same eternal and absolute truth—and the affirmation of whatever conforms to it. As al-Kindī stated over a millennium ago, "We ought not be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it whatever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us" (al-Kindī 1974, 58). For the one committed to truth and objectivity, nothing is more important than the truth itself. Truth—at all levels—should never be disrespected, nor should there be any disdain for the one who speaks it or transmits it, regardless of their cultural or social background.

Speaking of truth and pluralism, the Islamization of philosophy must also be framed as an emancipatory effort to liberate the Muslim mind from the dominant Eurocentric epistemologies that treat "rationality" as a secular, universal abstraction and dismiss Islamic categories as particularistic or premodern (Faruque 2024a). Moreover, these epistemologies, whether in their Weberian or Foucauldian forms, tend to reduce all truths to social or historicized truths. So, the enduring challenge is not merely internal consistency within Islamic philosophy but emancipation from modern epistemologies that have marginalized non-Western ways of knowing. From this vantage point, the Islamization of philosophy also implies a radical critique of the secular, colonial, and scientistic assumptions that undergird much of contemporary knowledge production.

Since the Enlightenment and Kant's rejection of "intellectual intuition," the dominant understanding of reason in global discourse has been limited to instrumental and procedural rationality, occluding its higher, intuitive dimension. Toroghi and Noghani's article thus makes a necessary intervention. Their strong account of the Islamization of philosophy, grounded in Sadrian metaphysics, offers a fruitful way forward. But its promise will only be fully realized when it is brought into deeper dialogue with the broader accounts of reason and revelation across Islamic intellectual history—and when it is integrated with contemporary efforts to decolonize the conditions of knowing in the modern Muslim world.

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