Review of A brief introduction to Islamic philosophy, by Oliver Leaman

Author: James Winston Morris

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OLIVER LEAMAN:
A brief introduction to Islamic philosophy.

Professor Leaman is the prolific author, editor and translator of some seventeen histories, anthologies and thematic volumes relating to the history of Islamic, Jewish and ‘Eastern’ (including Islamic) philosophical traditions, as well as more contemporary topics. In particular, he recently edited, together with S. H. Nasr, a massive two-volume History of Islamic philosophy (Routledge, 1999) which provides what is certainly the most comprehensive survey to date of the many schools and traditions of Islamic philosophic and theological reflection. Against that background, the present volume consists of what can best be described as a series of short, condensed and highly personal essays on what the author judges to be of philosophic interest and value—usually as ‘philosophy’ is defined in today’s Anglo-American philosophy departments—in the debates and controversies of a wide range of earlier Islamic thinkers, with special attention to two key figures (Averroes and Maimonides) to whom he has devoted separate studies in the past.

Apart from a brief summary of essential historical and theological background, the author's meditations are arranged in a series of seven discrete chapters (on knowledge, mysticism, ontology, ethics, politics, the question of transmission, and language), usually focusing on one or two relevant controversies from very different historical and philosophical contexts in each case, and frequently highlighting as well the contemporary Islamic relevance of the issues and approaches in question. While this approach may serve to interest and motivate particularly bright and inquiring students previously unacquainted with Islamic philosophy, most of the discussions in fact presuppose a high level of familiarity with a wide range of Islamic (and Western) philosophical and theological traditions and their very different historical contexts. Indeed the overall impression is of a philosopher (much more than a historian of philosophy) seriously attempting to engage other philosophers and thinkers in constructive, thoughtful discussion of issues which remain particularly central in the political, ethical and theological contexts of contemporary Islamic intellectual life. Given the rarity of such creative efforts to bridge and connect what have too often remained isolated, highly specialized fields of scholarship and discourse, the author must surely be acknowledged for this independent, informed and often revealingly personal effort to, in the words of Henry Corbin, ‘bring Islamic philosophy out of the ghetto of Orientalism’. While other specialists in this field will no doubt supply a long list of thinkers, discussions and different approaches that could or should have been included in each chapter, they will also recognize the implicit challenges—and potentially fruitful further discussions—posed by each of these avowedly introductory topical essays.
The preface to this work, in a revealing reflection on the author's own intellectual itinerary, suggests that this study might be read as a sort of far-reaching correction to the once standard scholarly conception of the ‘history of Islamic philosophy’ as consisting above all of the ‘transmission’ of Greek philosophy (and especially Aristotle) from the Hellenistic world to medieval Latin scholasticism. Readers of these essays, even those who might strongly disagree with the author's own particular selections and philosophic perspectives, cannot help but be struck by how radically that broader conception of the subject has changed over the past quarter-century, in at least two key respects. First, this introduction gives serious consideration to the ongoing, diverse and highly sophisticated traditions of Islamic philosophy from throughout the ‘Eastern’ Islamic world, which are still vigorously flourishing especially in modern Iran. Secondly, the author constantly refers to the relevance of his chosen philosophical (and theologico-political) controversies to ongoing political, social, and scientific debates that increasingly engage Muslims—and unavoidably, as current events remind us, their neighbours as well—on a truly global scale. Professor Leaman's omission of both ‘history’ and ‘medieval’ in his most recent title on this subject is certainly no accident.

JAMES W. MORRIS