

Review of: "From Avicenna to Salam: The Excommunication of Muslim Scholars in the Islamic World"

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The editors of Qeios asked me to peer review this paper. I read it carefully and I find therein numerous conceptual and factual mistakes, plus severe misquotations. In fact, I harbor the suspicion that a central quote used in this paper is made up. I am not claiming that the author of this article made up the quote. This might have happened in the book from where he received the quote, which is Muhammad Abdus Salam's book *The Renaissance of Sciences in Islamic Countries* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 1994), or in the sources used there. The fact that the author of this paper, however, trusted this source and did not go about to double-check the quote in the original text by Ibn Khaldun troubles me. I suspect that he lacks the expertise to do so. There is no positive evidence that while writing this article he engaged in reading Arabic source texts or that he is knowledgeable about the sources of and the most important secondary literature on Islamic intellectual history. I have come to conclude that this article has so many problems that it should be retracted.

In my review, I will give one example each of the many conceptual and factual mistakes I see in this paper. I will also clarify the made-up quotation, ascribed to Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). Before I do so, however, let me question the overall set-up of the paper and problematize the trust it puts into the writings of Muhammad Abdus Salam (1926–96), who is, together with Malala Yousafzai, Pakistan's only Nobel laureate.

The paper is titled "From Avicenna to Salam." Avicenna lived in the 11th century, and Abdus Salam lived in the 20th. By focusing on these two great scientists of Islam, the paper tries to give the impression that what is true for one is also true for the other. Both worked in an intellectual environment hostile to philosophy and the natural sciences. In fact, the paper claims that what is true for these two is also true for all of Islam. I do not need to point out that this is an essentialist narrative that regards Islam as a monolithic entity which never changed and, in fact, has no ability to change. As the author concludes, "Many people emphasize that Islam as a religion appreciated science and scientists, but I postulate otherwise." He continues by referring to an "Islamic system" that prohibits a positive engagement with philosophy and the sciences. Look at statements such as: "The Islamic religious system and religious leaders divide human society into two major parts (...)." This "system" seemingly exists throughout Islamic history and has always hindered Muslims' engagement with philosophy and the sciences. The reductionalist and essentialist nature of this argument, which does not need to look at any particular period of Islamic history, should be clear. This is not what we call a critical and informed engagement with Islamic history.

But why Muhammad Abdus Salam? On numerous occasions, the article quotes Abdus Salam as an authority on Islamic

intellectual history. Yet, Abdus Salam was a physicist who received a Nobel Prize in 1979 in physics. He does not read Arabic or Persian, as far as I know, and I have no idea why we should accept him as an authority in a field where he never made any serious contribution. He is prone to misunderstand pre-modern scientific writings. In fact, Steven Weinberg (1933–2021), with whom Abdus Salam shared his 1979 Nobel Prize, does precisely that when in a polemical article, published in *The Times Literary Supplement* of January 17, 2007 (pp. 5–6), he accuses al-Ghazali (d. 1111) of denying causal connections because the latter wrote that it is God who turns cotton into ashes when it is touched by fire, and not the fire itself. This only shows that Weinberg has no experience and no expertise in reading pre-modern Islamic texts. How would he? He is a physicist and does not read Arabic. Although I haven't spent any time with Abdus Salam's works, I fear the same is true for him. Just from a superficial look at them, one glances that he subscribes to the decline narrative of the Islamic sciences, which is, of course, widely shared among modernist Muslim intellectuals in countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, etc. Contemporary scholars who do research in the field of Islamic intellectual history, however, have had ample reason to question it.

Let me now come to my three examples:

Wrong concepts: "Excommunication" is a term stemming from Christian Church law. It has a distinctly Christian context because Church authorities, such as the Pope, can decide on the excommunication of Church members. There is no authority like a "Church" in Islam (even if critics such as the author of this paper believe so when they refer to "superficial religious scholars"), and hence no authoritative body which could express such an excommunication. What this article talks about is the process of *takfir*. This word does not appear ever in the article, hence I am not sure the author is truly familiar with its complex history and the different conditions of *takfir*. Much has been written about this important concept. Suffice it to say that different legal authorities have different opinions about *takfir*, and also about who could become subject to it. While there were scholars who made philosophers the object of *takfir*, that was never the majority position among jurists, as far as I can tell. What's more, I do not know of any *takfir* against natural scientists (in the modern sense of the word). Islam is far less monolithic than the Christian Church, and there were different attitudes toward philosophy and the sciences at any period of its history. While the modern (and Muslim modernist) historiography has prioritized negative Islamic attitudes to philosophy, it has become clear in the last thirty years that this is a dangerously reduced version of its intellectual history.

Wrong facts: At one point in his paper, the author writes that Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi "was excommunicated as a result but he dies from natural causes." The following reference points to p. 141 of Ayman Shihadeh's article "From al-Ghazali to al-Razi: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology" *Arabic Sciences and Theology* 15 (2005): 141–79. (I added the publication details, as they are missing from this paper. This happens a lot. The paper does not follow a clear or established standard of referencing.) First, Shihadeh's article deals with Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who died in 1210, not with Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi, who died three centuries earlier in 925. Confusing the two is highly embarrassing, I think, and shows how little the author understands about Islamic intellectual history. Second, Shihadeh's paper nowhere says that al-Razi (whatever al-Razi) was excommunicated. He particularly does not say so on p. 141, as this paper claims. In fact, neither of these two al-Razis suffered from legal sanctions due to their work as

philosophers or scientists. Did they have opponents and detractors? Yes. Yet, we do not hear that any of them succeeded and created obstacles to their activities. Both were highly successful scientists and philosophers who left a rich oeuvre for us to study.

Wrong quotations: At a crucial point in the paper, the author quotes Ibn Khaldun with the following words: “We have heard of late that in the land of the Franks, and on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, there is a great cultivation of the philosophical sciences. They are said to be comprehensive, the people who know them numerous, and the students of them very many. Allah knows better what exists there, but it is clear that the problems of physics are of no importance for us in our religious affairs. Therefore, we must leave them alone.” The author refers to a 1966 reprint (?) of Franz Rosenthal’s 1958 English translation of Ibn Khaldun’s *al-Muqaddima* (without indicating a volume and page number of the work), as well as to Muhammad Abdus Salam’s book *The Renaissance of Sciences in Islamic Countries* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 1994), p. 9. (The ultimate source of the text remains unclear as the referencing is again done very sloppily and without abiding by an established standard).

I did not have access to Abdus Salam’s book, yet I found the first part of this quote in Ibn Khaldun’s *al-Muqaddima*, ed. A. al-Shaddādī, 3 vols. (Casablanca: Khizānat Ibn Khaldūn), 2005), vol. 3, p. 76. The passage is translated in *The Muqaddimah*, trans. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), vol. 3, pp. 117–18. It can be found at the end of a discussion of the proliferation of philosophy at Ibn Khaldun’s time. The second part of the quote, however, cannot be found there. Yes, Ibn Khaldun acknowledges that “the Franks” may practice philosophy, but here he does not write: “(...) but it is clear that the problems of physics are of no importance for us in our religious affairs. Therefore, we must leave them alone.” If this passage can be found anywhere in *al-Muqaddima*, it is here taken out of context. I doubt it can be found there as this is a highly uncharacteristic statement for Ibn Khaldun to make, who in general admired the philosophical and natural sciences and accepted their usefulness. He also accepted the epistemological limitations to philosophy that al-Ghazali set out in his oeuvre, although not the latter’s *takfir*. The second part of this quote is, as far as I can tell, an invention. I should also mention that in the same breath as the first part of the quote, Ibn Khaldun says that philosophy thrives during his time in the east of the Islamic world, in Iraq, Iran, and in Transoxania. This text cannot be used as evidence for the disregard of philosophy under Islam.

The appearance of this made-up quotation alone should lead to the withdrawal of the paper. Apart from that, the paper displays ignorance about the history of Islamic theology (the “different approaches to Islamic theology” are in no way limited to two, and even if they were, they would not be the peripatetic and the illuminationist schools, which are different traditions in Islamic philosophy) and is needlessly polemical (“superficial theologians”). It has no idea what Sufism or Salafism is (associating Ibn Khaldun with any of these two, as the paper does, reveals ignorance about all three) and refers to secondary literature in a pseudo-scholarly way, while I doubt that much of it was actually read (see the Shihadeh example). This is nowhere near a credible and serious academic engagement with this important subject.