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# Contrapuntal Readings in Muslim Thought: Translations and Transitions

Ebrahim Moosa

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A diverse and cosmopolitan world, in the best sense of the terms, requires the production of knowledge that will sustain such complexity. Central to such a goal is to ask how we relate to formative documents and exemplars located in a distant past. Historians and interpreters have identified the reading of texts as one of the major challenges. The demands of continuity within traditions and commitment to canons while also being open to creativity are another set of challenges. In fact, the past becomes contested precisely because the present is a contested zone. In order to resist the homogenization of both the past and the present, we require sensitive tools and theoretical applications. If not, we tend to colonize the past and announce the death of certain forms of knowledge (epistemicide) while privileging and preserving other kinds of knowledge as a result of the conjunctions of knowledge and power. Engaging in contrapuntal readings and acknowledging the processes of transculturation could be one way to minimize such deleterious effects.

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EVER SINCE I BECAME familiar with Walter Benjamin's notion of translation and Edward Said's gloss on contrapuntal readings, I intuitively recognized that both terms served as synecdoche for the interdisciplinary field of study known as "religious studies." Renaming religious studies as "translation studies" or "studies in contrapuntal discursivity" would perhaps be a more accurate description of the disciplinary focus. Perhaps, I should confess that for me the discipline of religious studies is a thoroughgoing exercise in translation and contrapuntal readings. The cumulative insights of Said and Benjamin helped me to understand the mutation of ethical traditions and provided me with explanatory categories of refinement in order to interpret the moral traditions of Islam.

My own research interests focus on both the medieval and modern periods. Muslim ethics, an amalgam of Islamic law, dialectical theology, and philosophy, especially the way they combine in the formidable twelfth-century thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), constitute one set of interests. Ghazali's legacy is enduring, rich, extremely diverse, and entrenched and at once, enigmatic and controversial. Scholars continue to debate his role in not only the shaping of the Muslim intellectual tradition in the early middle period of Islam, but also the long shadows he cast on the tradition at large. Another interest is the study of modern Muslim ethics and the formation of family law discourses within the bosom of modernity, especially, through nation-state constellations, apparatuses, and institutions. In each interest of mine, a considerable amount of translation takes place across space and time. Yet, the narratives retain an impressive coherence and intricate intellectual harmony as in a musical score.

Benjamin, the German Jewish thinker, preferred to call translation a "mode." One must quickly explain that while Benjamin begins with the idea of "translation" from one language to another, his insights are not limited to the commonplace notion of translation. To the contrary, the idea of translation makes sense in at least two frames: the philosophical and semiotic. In other words, in my understanding, it is the translation between different modes and patterns of intellectual languages that prove to be a far more profitable intellectual enterprise. By calling translation a mode, Benjamin meant to describe an ability to comprehend not only the original piece of writing, but more: as a modality, translation signified the "translatability" of the original (Benjamin 1968: 70). "Translatability" has a very special ring in his lexicon and being inattentive to it can result in one being "lost in translation," even as the pun is intended. The translatability of any language, writing, or discourse is that essential

and significant quality of a work or a canon, namely, its unfathomable, mysterious, and poetic character.

Perhaps, there was a reason why I was drawn to translation. It was perhaps largely because of autobiography. My formative training was in the traditional disciplines of Muslim thought that I acquired in the madrasas of India. These days, all madrasas are maligned with blasphemous indifference by a navel-gazing Western punditocracy, the media, and peddlers of government cant whose incessant claims that madrasas are breeding grounds for anti-Western terror is now accepted as fact, despite publicized evidence to the contrary (Bergen and Pandey 2005). This formative language for religion was subsequently supplemented by graduate training in religious studies. Thankfully, I acquired religious studies outside the United States, a fact that spared me some of the less-productive aspects of the polemics and orthodoxies surrounding this disciplinary field that had in places exhausted colleagues in the North American academy.

Equipped with at least two languages of philosophical reflection—traditional and (post) modern—I was compelled to find some conciliation between the different modes of imagining religion, which I had acquired. It is often wrongly assumed that madrasa education, like all orthodox seminaries or yeshivas, generates confessional modes of discursivity. Disciplined religiosity and self-formation do not automatically mean that intellectual and political agendas are also homogenized in places like madrasas or their equivalents in other religious traditions.

Working within the constraints of modern secular universities, Benjamin's notion of translation unconsciously seeped into my work. In my theoretical reference for reflection I attempted to advance the reciprocal relationship between different intellectual languages. In my case, it was to translate, perhaps even oscillate, between discourses stemming from different Muslim life-worlds, past and present, and the discourses of the humanities and social sciences as they powerfully palpitate in the discursive practices of the late modern West. The appealing aspect of Benjamin's notion of translation was the idea of reciprocity between languages (Benjamin 1968: 72). Reciprocity between languages implied a transformation and deepening of each language in the mirror of the "other." Hence, it presumed a continuum of transformations, which ultimately resisted abstract notions of identity and similarity (Benjamin 1978b: 324).

The enormous challenge of understanding a figure like Ghazali whose intellectual language was not only different to ours but separated by the chasms of time and cultures proved formidable. How to make sense of his ideas in our time was equally challenging. Nevertheless, by being attentive to reciprocity one would ensure that Ghazali's universe also expanded our semantic field. Translation, Benjamin believed, ought

to give voice to the intention (*intentio*) of the original: in my case, it was the thought of Ghazali. But such interpretation cannot be the mere reproduction of the original in another language as some doctrinaire scholars still insist is the only desideratum of studying the pre-modern world. To the contrary any discursive engagement (translation) with Ghazali following Benjamin must express itself as its own kind of *intentio* in our languages. This is because each translation must of necessity produce a harmony, a supplement, and complementarity between the original and the reproduction (Benjamin 1968: 79). In fact, Benjamin celebrates translation as an act of transcendence that establishes a kinship between languages of thought and production. "Translation," he notes with some overdetermination in my view, "attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as a translation of all the others" (Benjamin 1978b: 325).

It is indeed inspirational to observe how effectively the ideas of someone like Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas are effortlessly integrated into political theory, philosophy, and religious studies curricula in our universities. Yet, figures like Kautilya, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, or al-Ghazali remain neglected not only in the West but also in non-Western universities where there is a greater fascination and hunger for the ideas of John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Karl Marx than those thinkers who have organic roots in these cultures. This in part is the legacy of the coloniality of knowledge. The reason for the neglect is surely related to matters related to power. However, one cannot rule out the fact that ideas of a non-Western provenance in particular are rendered incoherent or anachronistic because of a poverty in discursive translation.

Legions of orientalists, for example, translated very significant texts of Muslim civilization into European languages and attempted to make them accessible to modern readers. Their labors and dedication cannot go unremarked nor unappreciated. Yet, only a few translations have managed to make an intercultural impact. Most translators have failed to ensure that their translations also advanced the reciprocity between languages. Why? Often translators did not aim at what Benjamin identified as that "single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one [tongue]" (1968: 76). The exceptions were, of course, figures like Louis Massignon, Arthur J. Arberry, or Margaret Smith among others, who had a deep empathy for their subjects and whose own subjectivities were transformed by their encounters with the "other." Often their work made a deep impact on intercivilizational communication and understanding, even if we only know this anecdotally. Otherwise, most translators and authors only heard the reverberations of power in their work and

gratuitously lectured their non-Western audiences. Alexis de Tocqueville, whose reflections on the treatment of blacks in the American South were laudable, remained unmoved by massacres in Algeria by the French because in his view Muslims had an inferior religion and must be disciplined. Today a whole cottage industry of intellectual masquerade echoing such sentiments persists with revealing titles such as “*What Went Wrong?*” (Lewis 2002).

Although comparative approaches in religious studies were always helpful, I found the execution of such methods often wanting for engaging in problematic comparisons. Such comparative studies could profit from Benjamin’s insights on translation. Take the debates about the Qur’an as an example. The Qur’an is always compared to be a scripture identical to the New Testament, a collection of writings in the Christian Bible. Therefore, many scholars felt compelled to apply the entire gamut of Biblical hermeneutics and text criticism perforce to ‘fit’ the Qur’an so that it may qualify as scripture, otherwise it remains a naïve Muslim claim. This is despite the fact that, compared to the Bible, the Qur’an plays a very different functional role in the religious and social imagination of Muslims. Little attention is given to the manner and modes in which people invoke and relate to what is called scripture. The words *brot* and *pain*, Benjamin pointed out, surely *intend* the same thing, namely, bread in German and French. But the critical difference is to fathom the “modes of intention” in the German and French diet for bread (Benjamin 1968: 74). Bread occupies certain spaces in the German and French cultural substrates that in turn make all the difference.

Applying this insight to my example of the Qur’an as scripture means that one has to understand the different modes of revelation in Christianity and Islam. Such an approach might reveal far more significant discoveries than barefoot comparisons of two book-like entities. Of course, one has to be mindful of the caution issued by Talal Asad that translation between different symbols and languages of imagination might not always be best achieved through representational discourses and there might well be more apt alternatives (Asad 1993: 193). More thoughtful comparativists now prefer to take a reductionist view of the Qur’an as *logos*. Hence, the equivalent of the Qur’an as *logos* in Islam would in Christianity be Jesus. Hence, to do a good translation between the theological languages of Christianity and Islam would require some transformation and unexpected comparisons: the notion of *logos* in one tradition therefore would appear in a very different place and form in another tradition. It is also the reason why searching for authoritative textual representations in the Bible and the Qur’an would miss many significant meanings.

Jesus and the Qur’an each has a very different performative history in their respective traditions; each articulates discrete genealogies of

imagination. Perhaps, a detailed comparative formula ought to focus on the complex modes of *how* subjects in each tradition intend to invoke the *logos*. We might then discover that Muslims intend by scripture a whole range of meanings that Christians do not ever contemplate, and vice versa. Surely, the word “scripture” in modern multicultural societies has a very distinctive ring when compared to how authoritative texts functioned in the discursive traditions of the two religions in the pre-modern period. I often have to remind students that it is peculiar as well as a luxury of modern literate and book-reading societies that people who are troubled by a moral or religious question can reach for their copies of the Qur’an, Bible, or Bhagwad Gita for solace. During earlier phases of each of these traditions questioners would have consulted living authorities. And, there was no guarantee then that the answer would be found in some authoritative written book. Nowadays, most people find their answers in books!

If one thinks about religious discourses as performance then the preferred metaphor that comes to mind is “contrapuntal” from the realm of music. The term “contrapuntal,” literally means counterpoint as the opposite of harmony in an ensemble. This metaphor was given theoretical currency by the Palestinian–American literary theorist and social critic Edward W. Said.<sup>1</sup> In Said’s grasp, however, contrapuntal morphs from an aural metaphor into a gaze or a view involving a counterpoint. So, we undertake contrapuntal readings when we engage the work of some extraordinary writers in order to produce new readings of their work from our specific vantage point. The mobility of the work of such significant authors enables it to travel across “temporal, cultural, and ideological boundaries in unforeseen ways to emerge as part of a new ensemble along with later history and subsequent art” (Said 2003: 24).

In my book *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* I undertook contrapuntal readings of a selection of Ghazali’s writings (Moosa 2005). A central question that animated my project was to configure the archeology of Ghazali’s thought, especially the creativity of his mind and the way he effortlessly sutured so many different tapestries of thought onto his self. In the process, he canonized himself in the Muslim intellectual tradition. Why did his thought enjoy such an extraordinary longevity within the Muslim tradition and what was the recipe, if any, for his intellectual success? This line of inquiry was also in some measure my protest against

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the same term “contrapuntal” was also used by Lewis Mumford, the renowned American historian of technology and science. Reflecting on the design of cities, Mumford found a certain attraction in the idea of a contrapuntal order in planning. For him such planning produced significant kinds of conflict that in turn generated an intellectually stimulating and complex disharmony (Mumford 1938: 4).

the lack of creativity in contemporary Muslim religious thought. If anything, I wanted to showcase a paradigmatic shift in knowledge with Ghazali as an exemplar. Hence, I tried to articulate Ghazali's thirteenth century intellectual harvest through the prism (luggage) of a twenty-first century translator's complicated cosmopolitan subjectivities.

Given my own location in the academy and the audience that I had in mind, it was inevitable that a critical appropriation of the Western humanities would feature prominently in my work. But such a move on my part also had to take into account the question of power. Throughout the writing process I struggled to keep alive that reciprocity between languages in order to balance the asymmetrical power dynamic caused by geopolitical hegemony that privileged certain discursive languages above others. What were the conditions of possibility for a discourse of religious studies, one embedded with some Ghazalian intimations and inflections? Critics and readers will have to judge whether I managed to realize a modicum of these ambitions and questions.

However, any critical student of religion cannot avoid at least two frustrations in the disciplinary field of religious studies and the humanities in general. One, is what all subaltern and marginalized traditions and people in the modern period often experience: the incessant triumphalist posture of the Western intellectual tradition and its claim to a coercive universality, while blissfully ignoring the fact that it is the product of a very specific cultural experience. The other is more specifically related to Islamic studies and the geopolitical location of Islam and Muslim societies in reply to contemporary political and cultural discourse. In the view of some thinkers in the West, Islam itself as a tradition is the enemy and has to be rewritten (reformed) into submission or politically vanquished. On the other hand, certain stripes of Muslim orthodoxy as well as fundamentalists deploy the tradition, as a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying adherents into submission. This coalition of absolutisms creates a noxious intellectual climate for critical reflection.

A genuine *aporia* born out of these frustrations but one that plagues the conscience of those attempting to re-engage or translate their historical traditions in contrapuntal fashion is the power differential or inequality between the different discursive languages in which one is imbricated. Translation cannot ignore the discourses of power. If we recall that for Benjamin the most felicitous of translations was one which can reproduce the structure of an alien discourse within a translator's own language. For such a move would ultimately show that not only the translator, but also the discursive tradition of the translator had profited meaningfully from the language of the other. Such a move to some extent neutralizes the power differential. Asad is also acutely sensitive to

this asymmetry in power and to his credit posed the problem of how one proceeds when the languages are so disparate that it becomes difficult to rewrite a harmonious *intentio* (Asad 1993: 189). A good translation, Asad points out, should always precede a critique and a good critique is always an internal critique. Such a critique, he continues, “is one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent” (Asad 1993: 189). The crucial insight is the shared life between original and translated. Benjamin is indebted to the observations of Rudolf Pannwitz in this regard. Pannwitz believes that a translator “must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language” (Benjamin 1968: 80–81).

In other words, we must have the humility to allow the past or the “other” to penetrate our own language and expand our own linguistic capacity rather than merely colonizing the past or the “other” in an instrumental fashion. Any contrapuntal reading must be vigilant of the inequality of languages so that one can avoid privileging the present in a totalizing manner. Every re-reading or interpretation of figures like Augustine or Ghazali reanimates them in the present and allows the modern and new to be situated in a broad historical field. The lesson of such a reading, said Said, shows us “history as an agonistic process still being made, rather than finished and settled at once” (Said 2004: 25). For his own occasional lapses in vigilance about the power of the present, Said had to endure stinging criticism by some of his interlocutors (Ahmad 1992).

But history also discloses another lesson, apart from its agonistic aspect, if we read the work of the South African novelist, John Coetzee as a counterpoint to Benjamin. One of Coetzee’s characters in *Elizabeth Costello* is an Australian literary critic by the same name as the title. “The past is history,” says Costello,

And what is history but a story made of air that we tell ourselves? Nevertheless, there is something miraculous about the past that the future lacks. What is miraculous about the past is that we have succeeded—God knows how—in making thousands and millions of individual fictions, fictions created by individual human beings, lock well enough into one another to give us what looks like a common past, a shared story. (Coetzee 2003: 38)

Coetzee and Benjamin share something in common. For Coetzee the future is a product of history, those structures of hopes and expectations residing in the mind just as history for Benjamin is all about memory. But

there is an important difference between the two authors. Memory for Benjamin is not an instrument but rather a medium, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities are interred (Benjamin 1978a: 26). The propitious image Benjamin flaunts also discloses the nugget of wisdom. A person who digs to recover her buried past must regard the “probing of the spade in the dark loam” as an indispensable part of the recovery itself. “Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding,” continues Benjamin, “and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade in ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers” (Benjamin 1978a: 26). The agonistic process itself is as much a part of history as is the destination of history. One could well say that there is no history outside the process of history!

Among the pleasures of examining the skeins of Ghazali’s writings was precisely the joy of assaying the spade in places old and new. Contrapuntal reading allows one to proclaim an enabling condition as well as impose a restraint. In Said’s words, one is allowed to proclaim some authority and also engage in some molestation (Said 1975: 83). The term *authority* has a constellation of linked meanings. Apart from meaning the power to enforce obedience, an *author* is also one who originates or one who increases (*auctor*) as well as produces and invents (*auctoritas*). But such invention and authorizing power, in Said’s view, is simultaneously subject to primordial molestation. People who produce literary work are constantly reminded that their fiction is subject to molestation when it is compared to some social reality.

In order to find a new descriptive vocabulary of how Ghazali dealt with diversity and multiplicity, insider and outsider knowledge required that I engage in a certain kind of molestation. Was Ghazali an insatiable eclectic or did he engage in creative production, poiêsis? Conventional views proclaimed that he was a middle of the road thinker and a supreme synthesizer of the disparate elements of the tradition. Any reader of Ghazali will notice that his repertoire bristles with insights drawn from law, ethics, philosophy, theology, philosophy, and mysticism. How then does one describe the work of someone whose originality lies in the way he recasts the work of others? The most apt description was the one I borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss, that of a bricoleur: a handyman who mends machinery or takes old materials only to find new uses for them. In another sense, I could have described him as an engineer. An engineer, says Lévi-Strauss always attempts to go beyond the constraints imposed by a given moment in civilization. A bricoleur on the other hand is always inclined to remain within certain limitations and constraints imposed by civilization. Ghazali then, in my view, was both an

engineer and a bricoleur: at times he was prepared to transgress the boundaries drawn by civilization and on other occasions he baulked and surrendered to constraints. As a bricoleur Ghazali engaged in two processes: first, he appropriated cultural elements from the dominant culture and then, second, he transformed meaning through ironic juxtaposition and innovative use in order to subtly challenge and subvert existing meanings.

At work in Ghazali's writings is a certain poetics. The bulk of his work describes the way things might be, the work of a poet, not the way they have been, for the latter is the role of a historian (Aristotle 2001: 1464). *Poiêsis* is the bringing forth of something involving imitation and representation. Incidentally, humanity's immense debt to poetic wisdom was also what Giambattista Vico (d. 1744), the Italian thinker and jurist, found so appealing as a way of understanding the ongoing process of history and the making of knowledge. If Ghazali thought that the potential for new ideas was embedded in poetic wisdom, then some of his very notable critics, chief among them Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (d. 1198), thought it to be a blemish. The narrative format and stories (*hikaya*) provided the format in which he braided both his intellectual promiscuity and his searing personal traumas.

Ghazali attained his epochal status within the tradition because of the way he imagined his own location. In his personal testimony there is a throwaway line which suggested that Ghazali thought of himself to be a threshold thinker. In Persian the word is *dihliz*, meaning the intermediate space between the house proper and the outer perimeter of the dwelling. Molesting Ghazali with his own words helped me to find the appropriate language to describe a medieval cosmopolitan figure: someone who is located at that intermediate space or border between the inside and outside of the tradition. His dramatic actions of exile—abandoning a prestigious professorship in Baghdad—by traveling for nearly eight or more years in search of his inner self, all coalesced in order to spark the momentous and agonistic meditations he left for posterity. Border thinkers or threshold thinkers prefer to inhabit those interstitial spaces because such locations allow them existential access to more than one culture and experience because their goal is to seek transitional paradigms of knowledge through dialogical thinking and critical cosmopolitanism.

The theme of exile occurs frequently in the writings of Said as well as the late Saudi-born novelist `Abd al-Rahman Munif, best known for his *Cities of Salt* trilogy, but who lived for most of his life in capitals around the world as a political refugee and exile. When the pressures of exile reached intolerable conditions, Munif wrote, the exiled person

sometimes longed to surrender to his tormentors because the “constraints render exile into a fictional space of freedom” (1992: 92) Perhaps, Said was less pessimistic, therefore his meditations best captured for me Ghazali’s location as an exile. At the same time it also helped identify the place intellectuals ought to occupy in their societies of the exile. Because exiles do not only know one home or culture, “their plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that, to borrow a phrase from music, is contrapuntal” (Said 2000: 184). Now more than any other time I believe that the disciplinary field of religious studies, and not only Islamic studies, ought to more aggressively espouse a contrapuntal awareness, so that our translations, reflections, and interpretations can inaugurate desirable transformations. Transformation is the gift and expectation for which the exile lives.

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