

Roy Jackson. *What Is Islamic Philosophy?* Routledge 2014. 190 pp. \$135.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780415632027); \$40.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780415632034).

With any introduction to philosophy, it can be difficult for the author to find the right balance between focusing on the subject versus focusing on the history of philosophy. This is especially so for Islamic philosophy, and most studies tend to focus exclusively or almost exclusively on medieval Islam. Perhaps this is understandable to some extent, but Roy Jackson's *What Is Islamic Philosophy?* notably ties Islamic philosophy to 20th and 21st century Muslim authors and issues, as well as medieval Islam and all points between. Yet Jackson does not do this through chapters primarily addressing historical stages rather than philosophical subjects. His second and third chapters do indeed address the philosophical background from Greece and Persia, and the major schools of thought that arose within Islam. After this foray, however, he focuses on issues in Islamic philosophy, some broad and some narrow.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with issues in philosophy of religion. At this point, Jackson is still presenting his study through the lens of history and individual thinkers. Chapter 4 discusses the existence of God, the soul, and the afterlife by focusing primarily on al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. The next chapter illustrates the relationship between faith and reason in Islam, and here Jackson jumps from medieval Muslim thinkers, such as Suhrawardi and his illuminationism, to 20th century scholars such as Soroush, and back again to Ibn Arabi (12th and 13th centuries), along with many others.

The great strength of *What Is Islamic Philosophy* is its account of Islamic ethics and political philosophy in chapters 6 through 9. Regarding the former, Islam and Islamic society are imbued with fatalism (109). Nevertheless, there is obviously a strong ethical tradition in Islam, and Jackson takes that tradition and applies it to contemporary ethical issues, such as abortion, cloning, end of life issues, homosexuality, women's rights, and the rights of non-Muslims. The misconceptions of Islam that Western civilization is rife with lead many to think that Islam has a unified and often unacceptable policy regarding at least some of these issues, but Jackson brings out the diversity of responses to them within Islam. In fact, while chapter 7 focuses on these ethical issues, the preceding chapter focuses on Islam and the state, and here the diversity of views is striking. He moves on in chapter 8 to discuss just war theory and the Islamic notion of jihad, demonstrating again the diversity within Islam. Chapter 9 then discusses whether there can be shared moral values between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the possibility of universal morality. As with the preceding chapters, much of the focus here is on contemporary Islam: Jackson contends that 'Moral relativism has been used as a weapon by Islamic governments to argue that to abide by UN moral law would be against Islamic moral law' (151). Nevertheless, even here there is diversity, and many Muslim thinkers advocate a shared, universal, non-relativistic morality.

While the overall structure of *What Is Islamic Philosophy* is commendable and the treatment of contemporary Islamic philosophy more than admirable, there are some significant drawbacks. Specifically there are some parts of the book where Jackson makes highly contentious claims, or at least implications that are both historical and philosophical in nature. For example, since Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is in touch with his spiritual side, Jackson seems to imply that Nietzsche may not have been an atheist ('though labelled as an atheist by many,' 88). Having said that, Jackson has written an entire book on the connection between Nietzsche and Islam, so this may be a misreading on my part. Or take the suggestion that Avicenna's cosmological argument depends upon the impossibility

of infinite regresses (51) when Avicenna actually maintained that the universe is eternal; as such, he clearly accepted some infinite regresses. Or the mistranslation of *Kitab Sirr al-khaliqah* as ‘The Book of Causes’ (18) rather than ‘Book of the Secret of Creation’. Or the point that Muslims generally did not force the people they conquered to convert to Islam; instead, they only required them to pay the *jizya* tax in order to ensure their protection by the greater Muslim forces (146). But of course, many of these conquered people could not afford to pay the *jizya* tax, and so had to choose between conversion to Islam or the withdrawal of Muslim protection. For all practical purposes, this is forced conversion. Or the historically inaccurate account of the destruction of the Library of Alexandria which Jackson relates. While noting how the Library was destroyed by Julius Caesar’s troops in 48-47 BC (although there is a misprint in the book, writing this as ‘AD’), Jackson argues that ‘the general consensus’ is that much of the Library remained until it was destroyed by Christians combating paganism in the fifth century AD (12). In point of fact, the Library went through a long, slow decline, suffering through several catastrophes in the centuries following its original destruction by Caesar, and did not exist as a library at the time Jackson ascribes its destruction to the Christians. The only thing destroyed around that time was the Serapium, burned by Theophilus in 391 AD—and while the Serapium may have housed books at some point in its history, at the time of its destruction it only held pagan idols and cult objects. Jackson further tries to connect this (as do many others) to the murder of Hypatia, but that took place nearly 25 years later in 415 AD.

Like several other points Jackson makes, it seems that the Library of Alexandria is brought in to imply that, whatever Islam’s sins may be, specifically regarding its reception of philosophy and classical learning, at least the Christians were no better. This is certainly a contestable point, but we will not address it here. Nevertheless, encountering this (implied) point being argued via flawed historical accounts does put the reader on his guard. However, having said this, there are certainly exceptions which contrast Christianity positively with Islam: for example, regarding the problem of evil Jackson writes that ‘In comparison with Christianity, Islam still has some way to go’ (113). Moreover, Jackson’s forte seems to be in contemporary Islamic philosophy, and most of the problems I have discovered are in the historical accounts, so his missteps in the latter may not carry over into the former.

Regardless, while there is much to criticize in *What Is Islamic Philosophy*, there is still plenty of valuable material here, and it functions overall as a suitable introduction to the subject.

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