

# Religion and Modern Metaphysics: retrieving a culture of liberal arts education for the three religions of the Book

If you try to be the lone wolf, all the packs will unite against you? – *Nathan the Wise*.

## Abstract

*In the early period of the Renaissance, in parts of Europe, Jew, Arab and Christian worked side by side in translating, discussing and commentating on ideas inherited from classical antiquity. In part, this shared language was carried within the programme of studies that were and are collectively known as the Liberal Arts. The following piece assesses ways in which the tradition of liberal arts education – in particular its search for first principles – might be modernised such that the conversations between the three books might again have a shared language in such education. In particular, I argue that this shared language needs to be grounded in a modern version of the idea of learning as an end in itself, which I then illustrate through selected ideas from Rowan Williams, Franz Rosenzweig and Bassam Tibi, calling on each as a representative of the religions of the Book.*

## Introduction

In its moments of greatest achievement, medieval culture positively thrived on holding at least two, and often many more, contrary ideas at the same time. This was the chapter of Europe's culture when Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side by side and, despite their intractable differences and hostilities, nourished a complex culture of tolerance ... [This culture] found expression in the often unconscious acceptance that contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one's culture—could be positive and productive. (Menocal, 2002, 11)

This culture of education between the three religions had common ground in the interpretation of neo-Platonic philosophy. In turn, this philosophical tradition had its roots in a culture of liberal arts education whose issues which became the *lingua franca* of the three faiths. In the following article I want to suggest a way in which a liberal arts education, and specifically its original

vocation to discover and to understand first principles, might again become the common language between the three faiths. To do this I need to argue for two things. First, for a re-education regarding the concept of first principles which has always had its own educational home in liberal arts. This re-education is grounded in the ideas of a modern metaphysics and a non-secular concept of reason, and expresses a contemporary version of something which has always been at the very heart of liberal arts, the idea of learning as an end in itself. Second, that this learning in itself and the work of non-secular reason associated with it can be found in Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and specifically below in work by Rowan Williams, Franz Rosenzweig and Bassam Tibi. I emphasize at this early stage in the paper that the three religions are not being told that they must now come and work within a specifically Western form of liberal arts education. If anything it is the opposite – liberal arts education is being invited to return to its ancient and medieval forms where the three religions were the crucible of such education. The liberal arts tradition need not seek the three religions from beyond reason; rather it can retrieve them from within its own rational re-education. This will require, I suspect, nothing less than a modern renaissance of the liberal arts culture of education. I recognise, of course, that in a short article this is, to say the least, ambitious and that important arguments will be dealt with in a shorthand form. Nevertheless I hope these weaknesses are to some extent justified by the urgency of working to retrieve a common educational language between the three religions.

## **Openness**

I want first to implicate my argument within one aspect of contemporary Western intellectual culture. This is the well-rehearsed view which sees any transcendental or metaphysical grand narrative as at best dogmatic and at worst a violent imperialism. Religion is by nature foundational and regardless of what it might claim to the contrary, is always suspected of being fundamental, and therefore not open. A non-fundamental religion is something of an oxymoron. The opposite of such fundamentalism, in many different forms, is often claimed to be ‘openness’. To be open is to avoid the dogma of closure, particularly those which are grounded in some form of teleological or eschatological enlightenment or of imperialism in relations between self and other. Openness here draws together both liberals and radicals who claim it for

liberal democracy and the critique of liberal democracy respectively. But there is also a philosophy of openness in which the concept of openness is opened up to its own contradictions. One example here is the idea of autoimmunity in Derrida where, in *Rogues* (2005), for example, he shows how the democracy of the United Nations attacks and undermines itself because even pluralism, tolerance and equality cannot avoid the imperialism of a self-legitimizing function. Žižek (1996) has argued that this same aporia affects post-foundational thought, including that which claims openness for itself against religion. Here he argues that claims for the openness of a text or narrative, or in general for the irreducibility of a particular to a universal, are merely contemporary forms of the production or culture of universality.

However, in making my case for a re-education regarding first principles, I will be calling on a notion of openness that is not just in opposition to closure but is also open to their antagonistic relation to each other as a culture (*Bildung*) or as an education that is valuable purely for its own sake. This culture, I believe, is both groundless and non-secular, open and spiritual, philosophical and religious. If we can find this culture in and between the three religions then we will have retrieved a common language in and around rational yet also spiritual education.

### **Learning as an end in itself**

The first part of my argument therefore requires me to expand on what I mean by this culture of openness and why I think it has its principle in learning as an end in itself. To this end I will argue for two things. First, for a notion of a modern metaphysics, going back to the relation between Kant and Hegel, and second, for the way in which this modern metaphysics expresses itself in a groundless but non-secular notion of reason which has its own principle in learning as an end in itself. It is this concept of learning which will then be retrieved in a representative of each of the three religions.

### *First principles*

The search for first principles was the rational and religious vocation of ancient liberal arts. However, I think we must recognise that the social relations and the logic that characterised this search for first principles have both been transformed in modernity. This has, in turn, changed the way we can understand the definition of a first principle. My claim here is that when openness is opposed to closure in the ways described above between pluralism and fundamentalism, it is an opposition grounded in an anachronistic concept of a first principle. In ancient philosophy, but especially in Aristotle, the logic of a first principle reflected the social relations of a master and slave society. The tradition of learning for its own sake in Ancient Greece was grounded in the independent and leisured free man and was in contrast to that of the education of the slave, and of the mechanic (*banausos*) who was trained merely in technical skills.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's logic of identity *per se* reflected this master and slave distinction, giving rise to the fundamental categories of the unchangeable, pure, independent and autonomous prime mover and the composite being that was changeable and contingent and not therefore its own end in itself. It was this distinction between what is in itself and what is for another that also grounded the logic of a first principle. For Aristotle the notion of a principle was understood according to three logical truisms: the logic of non-contradiction, the absurdity of infinite regression, and the necessity of a first cause.<sup>2</sup> Here, something was in itself or was its own end and principle when it was not possible for it to be otherwise and was irreducible to anything else. This same logic grounded the classical principle of learning as an end in itself, for only when one was unattached to the material world, including being free of the work needed to provide for basic needs, would thought be true in itself, uncorrupted by contingency, privation or change caused by an other.

However, the social relations have long since passed away in which this principle of learning as an end in itself and the logic of a principle *per se* were expressed. The modern principle of learning as an end in itself, as of a principle *per se*, is now formed from a completely different set of social relations and from different conceptions of logic, of freedom and of education. Therefore, it is to the modern logic of metaphysics and not its ancient counterpart that we must

---

<sup>1</sup> Since antiquity, this same version of education has pejoratively been known as a 'classical' education, and has remained the education of a class who deem themselves called upon to govern.

<sup>2</sup> See XXX 2009, Chapter 1.

now look in seeking to understand the logic of modern first principles. This modern metaphysics, which gives rise to the principle of non-secular reason, or spirit, is to be found, I believe, in the relation between Kant and Hegel.<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of modern metaphysics is this. Kant demonstrated the unavoidable subjective mediation of objects in consciousness and expressed this as the synthetic *a priori* where the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are likewise the conditions of the possibility of objects of experience. Kant saw that this led only to an infinite regression to absurdity where truth became a merely relative concept. To avoid this reduction to absurdity he invoked a transcendental *a priori*. Hegel, however, argued that the aporia of the synthetic *a priori* need not be presupposed as error, but seen rather as a universal in its own right. This changes the logic of a first principle. Where Aristotle said that what is primary is that which cannot be anything other than itself, Kant and Hegel between them showed that when reason is primary, it cannot help but be something else, or that when reason is objective it cannot help also being subjective. But Hegel's unique contribution here is that he sees that in being something else, reason *is* following its *own* logic. He finds here a culture of rational self-critique where culture means thought reproducing its truth to itself as if it were opposed to itself. The learning that is involved here in this rational culture, in which the self-opposition is reproduced, is the whole, or in Hegel is the Absolute. Because it is a culture, it is the relation in which learning—philosophical learning—is found as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> As such, modern metaphysics does not yield to the popular misconception of it as a rational teleological closure. Instead, it is the new modern metaphysics of a first principle, and is the modern ground (and as we will see, the groundlessness) of openness to its own self-oppositions and contradictions.

The nature of learning as an end in itself here is revealing. It is not grounded in any idea of enlightenment as overcoming, or in any merely positive result. It is grounded in loss and self-destruction—a self destructiveness already drawn attention to by the medieval Islamic thinker al-Ghazali (who we will return to below). We are now drawn to the modern conclusion that openness is not truly open unless it is open to losing itself in claiming itself, and learning to

---

<sup>3</sup> I can only be very brief here but I have expanded upon this argument in XXX

<sup>4</sup> This notion of philosophical learning is explained in detail in XXX 2004, 2005, 2008 & 2009.

‘know thyself’ in this collapse. This is its spiritual significance. This same philosophy of learning is also the new metaphysics of a first principle that a renewed vision of liberal arts, a *modern* liberal arts, will need to work with. This, in turn, will open liberal arts once again to its vocation to work in the broken middle<sup>5</sup> between philosophy and religion, and to reveal the spiritual significance of doing so.

### **Modern groundless reason**

We are now in a position to explore the religious and spiritual import of the modern metaphysics of reason. The first point to make is that when reason is unequivocally criticised as the sovereign, imperial, Western master, this is both true and untrue at the same time. Such critique fundamentally misunderstands not only the process of learning that culminated in enlightenment reason, but the continuing legacy of that learning which is still carried by reason in the modern world. If we accept that the Reformation opened up individual access to truth, and that the Enlightenment grounded this openness in the universality of enlightenment reason, we must nevertheless also learn how this grounding is autoimmune or self-contradictory. Modern reason learns not that the unification of God and man is rational, but that it is their separation that is rational. Looked at from one point of view this means that reason grounds itself in its own universality, a move which signifies the death of God. But from another point of view modern metaphysics understands the universality of reason to lie in the defeat of reason’s assumed mastery. The critical piece of the jigsaw so often overlooked in criticisms of the imperialism of enlightenment reason is this: the logic that grounds reason as the overcoming of the irrational is the same logic that overcomes the irrationality of this overcoming.<sup>6</sup> The ground and logic of modern reason is the totality of this groundlessness. Here, in this first principle of reason’s continuing self-education about its own lack of ground, we find its non-secular character.

---

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘the broken middle’ I take from Gillian Rose. See Rose, 1992 and XXX 2000.

<sup>6</sup> This is a version of Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectic of enlightenment. See Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979.

This non-secular or spiritual nature of groundless reason has implications which reach deep into the retrieval of a culture of education between the three religions. Reason is usually interpreted as secular within its abstraction as victorious enlightenment. But because reason has established its universality negatively in surrender and loss, its truth is not factual. It is presented as factual when reason takes its positive stand in the world as enlightenment, but this illusion is based on the idea that its groundlessness has been overcome. Indeed this illusion is precisely that the spiritual plays no part. But spirit is to be found in the illusion that makes spirit appear redundant. It is in the groundlessness of modern reason that the divine can be understood to be within reason.

Therefore, the characteristics of modern groundless reason are not merely those of its critics that it is imperial, closed and triumphal. It has these. But also and at the same time, it has no other ground than loss of itself to itself on which to take such a stand. Rather than seek world domination reason is once again commended to 'know thyself', or to be open to learning from the difficulties that envelop it. What it learns in doing so redefines both reason and, as we will see below, its work in the world between the three religions. It learns, for example, that it is characterized not by certainty but by uncertainty, not by identity but by the illusion of identity, not by stability but by unrest, and not by knowledge but by doubt. As such, it is completely different from the stereotype of reason that is the target of the post-foundational critiques. In the tradition of Socrates modern reason knows that it does not know. This is the groundlessness of its ground. But modern reason can also learn of the educational significance for it of this groundlessness. Because it is open to losing itself it is open to learning about this loss as an end in itself. It is with this non-secular concept of reason and of the principle of openness being grounded in this rational and spiritual learning that I now approach the idea of a culture of rational and spiritual education being retrieved as the common language between the three religions of the Book.

### **The three religions**

I believe we can find this culture of modern groundless reason—and its first principle of learning as an end in itself—in a representative of each of the three religions: Rowan Williams, Franz Rosenzweig and Bassam Tibi. Clearly these choices are highly selective, chosen for the ways in which they make a conversation possible rather than impossible. But I have chosen thinkers who, I believe, are already looking for a concept of reason that is more open to its spiritual nature than its secular stereotype makes apparent.

### *Rowan Williams*

In the thinking of the present Archbishop of Canterbury I discern in a very precise way a struggle to express the spirituality of modern reason as a process of learning and of education, or as a phenomenology of spirit in which reason travels on the educational pathway of negative experience, recognising its own myriad forms of misrecognition as it does so. I believe that one can argue here that Williams is employing the form of modern metaphysics outlined above where reason learns of its own non-secular character but does so precisely from and in using reason. The power of Williams' thinking here is that he is so often able to reveal spirit in the most prosaic of life's modern experiences. One example will have to suffice here. When Williams discusses how parents in England choose schools for their children he asks them to reflect on the illusions that are carried by the appearance of this 'free' choice. He argues that the free market's heralding of consumer choice, in education at least, 'encourages us to ignore the contexts and effects of such choice' (2000: 34). We are encouraged to think only of ourselves and our own needs, regardless of the effect they may have on others. This, says Williams, is part of a wider social problem where in reality choice becomes 'the successful assertion of will' (2000: 36). Rather than being the solution to many of society's problems, the rhetoric of choice, for Williams, needs to 'be stripped of its false innocence,' (2000: 36), that is, stripped of the idea that my choices don't affect anyone else's. Adults may not be very clear in their understanding of the ambivalences that characterise freedom of choice and seem content to remain uninformed about how their choices make a difference to others. Nevertheless, Williams commends the spiritual education here that 'choice for one group is preserved or defended at the cost of the freedom of others to choose what they want or need' (2000: 37). I think we can say two things

here. First Williams is asking for parents to be open to the contradictions of choosing on what appear to be purely rational grounds, and second that the groundlessness of the choice that is opened up in such contradictions – ‘whatever I do, it will be wrong for someone’ – may well have a philosophical and spiritual component.

This spiritual significance can be seen to be a philosophy of learning in Williams when it is taken to other aspects of his work. I will give two examples here. First, in his book on *Dostoevsky* Williams provides us with an extraordinary portrayal of the contradictions of a modern philosophy of openness. Openness that has no limits, he says, is bound to be terroristic. Therefore it is to the relation between openness and its limits that we must look if we are to learn of the truth of openness. In Dostoevsky’s novels this is where the author insists on the freedom of the characters to continue to engage in difficult dialogues so that they brush up against and feel their own limits, or their lack of ‘resolutions or good endings’ (2008, 12). The failure to engage with these limits, and with the education that this experience yields for Dostoevsky is, says Williams, a closure of truth and an openness only for the demonic. Another form of demonic closure is the abstract rationalization of enlightenment reason. When Dostoevsky defends ‘the freedom to refuse what is rational’ (2008, 18) it is to the notion of groundless reason that we might re-direct him. This latter has its spirituality in the necessity of learning, the unavoidable journey from and return to itself in the movement of learning as an end in itself. To deny or avoid this necessity is for Williams, ‘the triumph of the diabolical’ (2008, 71) for it is where ‘we cannot bear to see what we cannot deny is the truth, in ourselves and in the world’ (2008, 71).

Williams argues that the ‘open exchange of human discourse’ (2008, 126) is intrinsically open and is in opposition to the diabolic. Speech, says Williams, ‘may be free but it needs to be *hearable*—otherwise it fails finally to be language at all’ (2008, 134). In a specifically religious sense for Williams, the author or creator is present in the meaning—the conflict of meaning—that emerges from the dialogue. The author is the freedom and non-freedom of the characters, just as the Creator is the truth and non-truth of the creatures. And, we can add now, learning as

an end in itself is the truth and non-truth of modern reason. The spiritual nature of groundless reason is the spiritual nature of the ‘narrative of learning’ (2008, 146) in the Dostoevsky novel.<sup>7</sup>

There is also a philosophy of spiritual education in Williams’ neo-Hegelianism. It is well-known that he greatly enjoyed the influence of the Hegelian thinker Gillian Rose. Of her philosophy he says, ‘central to Rose’s concern is the importance of error and the recognisability of error. To recognise misperception is to learn; to learn is to re-imagine or re-conceive the self’ (Williams, 1995, p. 9). This learning never leads to an individuality or a society being “mended” in a final way’ (1995, p. 9), and this lack of a final resolution, or of perfection, raises, says Williams, ‘obliquely but inexorably a religious question’ (1995, p. 9). In describing the groundless character of this education, he says the self is not ‘a substance one unearths by peeling away layers until one gets to the core, but an integrity one struggles to bring into existence’ (2000, p. 240). This integrity is both formed and tested in our relations with each other. In acknowledging my mistakes, my errors, I also affirm that I am never done with knowing and learning; ‘I do not cease to be vulnerable...’ (2000, p. 241). Again this groundlessness appears in the ways in which ‘our time [on earth] can be apprehended by us as a question, or a challenge, as something to be filled. To sense my future as being a question to me is to sense that what I can receive, digest and react to is not yet settled or finished (2000, p. 249). He calls this an education of ‘dispossession’ (1995, p. 15). In it we are constantly made aware that we are not the masters we appear to be. He says, ‘thinking is itself a learning of some sort of dispossession, the constant rediscovery and critique of the myth of the self as owner of its perceptions and positions; thinking unsettles all claims to a final resolution of how we define and speak of our interest’ (1995, p. 17).

---

<sup>7</sup> Or again, ‘the authorial “providence” is in the provision of the time for change or for learning, the background plenitude which continues to resource the narration and thus to give to the characters an excess of reality over and above the sum total of their past or their present circumstances’ (2008, 149). I take issue with Williams’ use of the term ‘excess’ here. When learning is an end in itself it precisely does not exceed itself. Indeed, one of the most important things that learning learns about itself is that the idea that it can go beyond itself is only an illusion generated by its positing for itself a natural beginning. In essence, learning is always returned to itself before it can achieve a standpoint which it might exceed. I think this notion of excess is much less visible in Williams when he translates educative reason as authorial responsibility—and here I have the philosophical teacher in mind see XXX, 2005)—arguing that ‘responsibility is an invitation for others to be freely what they are’ (2008, 169). But it is much more visible when he says ‘the negative moment is the recognition of excess’ (2008, 222).

Thus, Williams is able to conclude that this thinking, this learning in dispossession, promises ‘human transformation’ (2000, p. 253), or educational change. This might, says Williams, educate us to recognise how God is present in this education in a world ‘where circumstances oblige us to choose between more and less damaging options; where this happens, where the tragic dimension of the moral world impinges, what gives joy is... the candid acknowledgment of powerlessness, in grief, not in complacency, because this in its way models the divine dispossession’ (2000, p. 263). I think the conception of God that Williams works with here complements the ideas of modern metaphysics that I have presented above. There, as now in Williams, God and learning together are present in the groundlessness of merely secular forms of modern reason. Without its educative and now religious significance reason’s contradictions are nugatory. With this significance the Christian tradition finds a notion of reason which commends itself as other than merely secular.

### *Franz Rosenzweig*

I turn now to Rosenzweig and his *Star of Redemption* (1921). In its own way this book is already an educational confrontation between Judaism and the Christian West, or between the eternal people and the peoples of the historical nations. In a piece written around the same time as *The Star* Rosenzweig argues for a ‘renaissance of Jewish learning’ (Rosenzweig, 1955, 55) which is not to be found in books but in life itself.<sup>8</sup> The openness of this learning is emphasized when Rosenzweig says ‘There is one recipe alone that can make a person Jewish... [and] that recipe is to have no recipe’ (1955, 66). It requires immersion in the necessity of ‘naturally grown freedom’ (1955, 84), a freedom that can only emerge from the inner power that sustains living reality.

One way to relate the *Star of Redemption* to the notion of learning as an end in itself is through the rationality of spirit as relation of self to self and self to other. The *Star* itself consists of two

---

<sup>8</sup> In XXX I have also shown how Buber seeks an educational Jewish spirit for a renewal of Jewish life against ‘the loneliness of its intellectualization’ (XXX, 2004: 147; Buber, 1967, 159).

sets of triadic relations: God, world and man form one triangle; creation, revelation and redemption form the second. Together they configure the Star. Each point on the Star is related to the other points. These relations raise the rational opposition between world-time and eternal time. For Rosenzweig the gift given by the loving God is the eternal in the form of the present. In historical time it is received by man only as the promise of the eternal. But for God who is eternally present in the present, 'redemption is truly as old as creation and revelation' (1971, 272).

Here Rosenzweig makes the crucial distinction between Judaism and Christianity. The latter, he says, is pagan because it 'has made an epoch out of the present' (1971, 338) and believes that creation and revelation are to be grasped in the way through time. This speaks of an absent God, when compared to Judaism which knows creation, revelation and redemption in the life that is today. The way of Christianity he says is always at the mid-point between beginning and end which it can never unite whereas the life of Judaism unites beginning and end in lived eternity. But this is also how and why the Jews, as the eternal people, are deprived of 'power over time' (1971, 304) and suffer the lot of the homeless.

How, then, does the notion of modern groundless reason and its truth in learning open up in Rosenzweig a different relationship between pagan Christianity and Judaism? This seems especially difficult given that Rosenzweig sees contradictions in Judaism resolved by the present eternity of the life lived, especially life lived in the eternal pattern of the yearly cycle. As such, the Jew and the Christian cannot meet in contradiction because for the Jew contradiction is within God and is 'in ceaseless connection precisely with itself' (1971, 349), while in Christianity contradiction is external to God, as His Son. Yet Rosenzweig also demonstrates how Judaism and Christianity share an education in incompleteness. The rays of the Star shine out (Christianity) while its inner glow remains in the interior (Judaism). There is a cost here for both. Christianity loses contact with the One, while Judaism never gains contact with the world. But this education in incompleteness is the work that relates one to the other. The Jew's presence on earth constantly reminds the Christian that the unity of man and God remains impossible for

it. This is, says Rosenzweig, ‘the profoundest reason for the Christian hatred of the Jew’ (1971, 413). And Christianity too, is a constant reminder to the Jew that he lacks the way to God in history. As such, says Rosenzweig, ‘He has set enmity between the two for all time, and withal has most intimately bound each to each... The truth, the whole truth, thus belongs neither to them nor to us’ (1971, 415-16). Both Jew and Christian ‘have but a part of the whole’ (1971, 416).

What kind of reason and what kind of ‘whole’ is it that Rosenzweig employs here to illustrate how Jew and Christian ‘both labour at the same task?’ (1971, 415) Rosenzweig is critical of Hegelian reason whose Absolute, he believes, overcomes the need for presuppositions of the divine. But this is not, I believe, the notion of reason (in Hegel) in which learning is an end in itself and which is found in modern metaphysics as outlined above. In the educational concept of groundless and non-secular reason it is precisely such a pre-determined relation to the object that is comprehended as the illusion of any such standpoint. Not only is this the notion of non-secular reason found above in the Christianity of Williams, it is, I believe, this same reason that Rosenzweig employs in relating the Jew and the Christian in the Star. The Jew learns of his differences from himself in the antagonism of present eternity and history while the Christian learns of his difference from himself in the antagonism of the way of the present and eternity. For both, this groundlessness of the self is also the ground of the relation to the other. They are bound together and apart not by being the same as or different to each other, but by openness to self, and to self and other, an openness grounded only in this groundless learning. Groundlessness only demands that its truth be expressed in learning as an end in itself.<sup>9</sup>

What Williams and Rosenzweig share is a non-secular concept of reason whose truth in learning is an end in itself. This would not be the case for Rosenzweig if he had ended his thinking with merely the difference between Jew and Christian, or between life and the way, or between the inner fire and rays of the Star. But he does not stop there. On the contrary, he finds incompleteness

---

<sup>9</sup> This is not a ‘mutual’ groundlessness for positing mutuality here would be another illusory standpoint. The concept of mutual recognition is always a suppression of the totality that is false.

in both rays and fire, for each disallows completion for itself as for the other. The whole of which Christian and Jew are the parts, is a whole which expresses itself in and as such learning. Given the nature of reason as groundless we can say that this is the rational relation that binds Jew and Christian to themselves as to each other. It is wherein each, being open to itself as part of the educational relation between completeness and incompleteness, finds truth in this openness. This is neither the reconciliation of Jew and Christian, nor the lack of such reconciliation. It is a different kind of truth altogether—a truth shared in learning as an end in itself.

### *Bassam Tibi*

Finally I turn to Bassam Tibi who is known for arguing against fundamentalism in Islam and arguing for a cultural shift in Islamic thinking towards secularism—or at least for a separation of religion and civil society—and for a retrieval of the Averroist tradition of reason in Islam.<sup>10</sup> This tradition he sees as characterized by openness to learning from the other. It might, then, find an ally in the non-secular and groundless reason that we have been exploring.

It is part of Tibi's argument that the rational and open tradition of Islam, at its height in medieval Islamic civilization, declined while the more legalistic tradition of *fiqh* grew in strength and came to dominate Islamic culture. Whereas in medieval Islam the Mu'tazilite theologians 'acted as Defenders of Reason' (2009, 110), they have since lost out to the *fiqh* Islam – Islamic sacral jurisprudence – 'that had and continues to have a monopoly over the interpretation of religious affairs in Islam' (2009, 110). One can define *fiqh* as knowledge but Tibi observes that 'juridical science as *fiqh* is considered in Islam to be knowledge par excellence, above time and space' (2009, 117). As such this conception of *fiqh* claims to be divine law revealed by God, but, says Tibi, it is palpably a human endeavour. He adds that the term *shari'a* occurs only once in the Qur'an (45/18) and that in the Qur'an it carries no legal meaning. Rather *shari'a* in the Qur'an is

---

<sup>10</sup> He admits to being influenced by the Moroccan Islamic philosopher Mohammed al-Jabri who has argued that 'the survival of a philosophical tradition to contribute to our time can only be Averroist' (Tibi, 2009: 175).

‘a morality of conduct for the *summum bonum*’ (2009, 107). Tibi concludes that ‘Shari’a is not in consonance with international standards of law and it contradicts democratic constitutionalism in substance. The conflict is not only with other civilizations (not only with the West), but also within Islamic civilization itself’ (2009, 112). Tibi acknowledges that some will see his view as too Western but his response is twofold. First, the cultural-relative anthropological view which he labels post-modern, he sees in effect as racist. Not only is it Eurocentric to ‘view non-Western cultures solely in the European context of colonial and post-colonial constraints’ (2009, 132), it is also racist to orientalise the other in such a way that ‘difference become sacred’ (2009, 143). Second, this falls into the trap of arguing that the concepts and categories used to understand societies in the West, not least those concerned with human rights, are irrelevant and inapplicable to the East. Tibi remarks here, ‘I am a Muslim and I ask: is it legitimate that I am to be tortured, in violation of my individual human rights, in the name of humanity?’ (2009, 143) It is intriguing, he says, to see post-modernists defending others’ authenticity.

Tibi therefore finds a tension both within Islam, and between Islam and the West. The roots of Islamophobia in Europe, he says, are grounded in ‘the stereotype of a *homo Islamicus*, based on an essentialized preconception of people of the Islamic civilization. They are viewed as humans who act in accord with cultural patterns that do not change’ (2009, 38). Against this, however, Tibi wants to emphasize that ‘Islam has always been in flux’ (2009, 38) and is so now. The tensions that it experiences in the wider world reflect tensions that inhere in Islam. The two most important of its predicaments with modernity are the secularization of civil society and ‘the principle of subjectivity’ (2009, 143).

His case for retrieving the rational Averroist tradition of Islam is primarily that these ‘better’ days were characterized by ‘being open to learning from others’ (2009, 46). Medieval Islam was ‘for many centuries the world’s leading civilization’ (2009, 47). Today, he says, the Qur’an is seen as absolute and never changing but in medieval civilization Muslims were invariably involved ‘in controversial debates on knowledge and on the meaning of the Qur’an. They not only arrived at different interpretations (*tafsir* or more radical *ta’wil*) but they also made a

distinction between divine knowledge and philosophical knowledge' (2009, 49), referring specifically to the notion of double truth in Averroes.<sup>11</sup> But currently in Islam 'questioning of the text is considered to be an act of *kafr*/heresy' (2009, 49). Tibi argues that the Islamic scriptural sciences were set 'in opposition to the Hellenized rational disciplines of philosophy and science' (2009, 51) and the latter were eventually to become only 'the suppressed classical heritage of Islam' (2009, 51). As such, present Islamic civilization 'falls not only behind universal knowledge, but also behind the standards accomplished in medieval Islam by Islamic rationalism' (2009, 77), especially unfortunate since 'the idea of objectivity in the sciences also has its roots in Islamic rationalism' (2009, 78). He concludes that medieval Islam recognised 'the primacy of reason as the only road to rational knowledge' (2009, 94) and was 'open minded and willing to learn from other cultures' (2009, 94).

It is this spirit of learning and openness that the Western concept of groundless reason, having its truth in learning as an end in itself, might engage with. Moreover, Tibi himself is drawn to that aspect of Western reason and subjectivity that has *doubt* as one of its most important elements. He interprets modernity not as an age of imperialistic certainty so much as an 'age of uncertainty' (2009, 83), whereas in Islam as elsewhere, fundamentalism offers authenticity of identity and 'the comfort of belief versus the discomfort of doubt' (2009, 83).<sup>12</sup>

In sum Tibi states that 'the Renaissance – and earlier the Hellenization of Islam – were bridges in the civilizational encounters between Islam and Europe. So why cannot cultural modernity be such a bridge in the twenty-first century?' (2009, 37). Such an act of bridge-building might bring the notion of non-secular groundless reason to Tibi's concerns. But what kind of bridge could be built? In one sense I think the history of this tradition, say from al-Kindi to Averroes, already

---

<sup>11</sup> On this, and for a reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, see XXX (2009) chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> This plays its part in what Tibi calls the identity politics of Islam, one where identity is always defined against the fault lines that distinguish identity from 'the other'. 'This pattern of identity politics, as currently spreading, is based on an Islamic perception of the self as an imagined community under attack. It is the trans-national *umma* of Islam perceived to be under siege. This Islamic identity politics leads to conflict in the name of fighting a jihad against the imaginary enemies of Islam: the crusaders, the Jews, and their Muslim allies' (2009, 148).

contains the contradictions that remain apparent when Hellenic reason meets Islamic religious truth. Al-Farabi, for example, tries to wrestle with the relation between the philosopher king who returns to the cave and the Imam whose responsibility is to remain united with spiritual beings through the imagination. The active intellect here is not merely rationalized, but retains its divine and mystical character. When Corbin says of this that ‘the relationship between Islam and philosophy is possibly one of irreconcilable opposition’ (2006, 164) this is a judgement based, I suggest, on a relation between Islam and *secular* Western reason. But when al-Farabi says that the Imam, philosopher and legislator ‘is but a single idea’ (al-Farabi, 2001, 47) he is, by implication, not working exclusively with a merely secular view of Hellenic reason but is invoking something akin to the modern notion of groundless non-secular reason. Indeed, it is in philosophy that al-Farabi finds this single idea expressed as divine truth.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Western reason from medieval Islam remains al-Ghazali. He saw the need for a revival of the religious sciences against the rational Islamic philosophers who, he said, were a source of error. For him, their reason is ‘incapable of grasping all problems or of getting to the heart of all difficulties’ (1980, 71). As such, proof of God is not to be found in Hellenic reason but in revelation and the instruction of the prophets. Yet the nature of Hellenic reason that al-Ghazali opposes is instructive. Hellenic reason, he argues, is self-destructive because the means by which it asserts truth is the same means by which that truth is undermined. This comes very close to a medieval recognition of the groundlessness of reason in modern metaphysics. This aporia of non-secular modern reason might be returned to al-Ghazali now as a contribution to bridge-building. In addition, Al-Ghazali’s critique of Western reason, that it simply presupposes its own sovereignty over God, is part of what modern reason now learns about itself. Where for al-Ghazali reason creates rational issues for God’s truth that it assumes must affect God, so, modern enlightenment reason creates rational contradictions in thinking truth that it assumes must affect truth. In both cases—and part of the truth of learning as an end in itself—the fear of these errors may in fact be the real error.

## **Conclusion**

The quietest contributor to my discussion of non-secular modern reason has been liberal arts. But as I have tried to illustrate I believe that liberal arts education may well have a crucial role to play in the West's modern spiritual education. As I noted at the beginning of this article it was the liberal arts that provided the common language for the rational meetings of the three religions. Importantly the liberal arts engendered a culture in which rational contradiction could be productive. But of most significance the liberal arts were the site of this culture because they retained at their core the vocation to search for and to understand first principles. This of course immediately raises concerns in the West that to search for first principles now, particularly in the educational tradition that began in slave societies, looks not just awkwardly anachronistic but also horribly dogmatic and outwardly imperial. Is it not just another subterfuge for practising the ideology that white is right and West is best?

Many have argued for a different kind of liberal arts, not least Martha Nussbaum (1997 & 2010) for whom Stoic cosmopolitanism provides an open and tolerant stance for liberal arts education. While she does not hold liberal arts as any longer accountable to producing first principles, someone like Allan Bloom does (1987) but I am not convinced that either of these approaches has come to terms with the reformed logic of first principles found in modern metaphysics. I think instead that a renaissance of liberal arts, re-discovering its vocation to find first principles now within modern metaphysics, has the opportunity to find within it a non-secular concept of reason. This non-secular concept of reason can be the condition of the possibility of the three faiths having a common language once again, one grounded only in education as an end in itself. I end here by repeating the point made earlier. This is not an invitation from the West to the irrational religions to come and unburden themselves of their errors. It is an invitation to the West to retrieve the rationality of the religions within its own concept of reason.

Nigel Tubbs  
University of Winchester  
2012

## References

- Al-Farabi, A.N. (2001) *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Al-Ghazali, A.H.M. (1980) *Deliverance from Error*, Fons Vitae: Louisville KY.
- Bloom, A. (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Buber, M. (1971) *On Judaism*, New York: Schocken Books.
- Corbin, H. (2006) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Kegan Paul.
- Derrida, . (2005) *Rogues*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso.
- Menocal, M.R. (2002) *The Ornament of the World*, New York: Back Bay Books.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010) *Not For Profit*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rose, G. (1992) *The Broken Middle*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rosenzweig, F. (1955) 'Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning' in *On Jewish Learning*, New York: Schocken Books, pp. 55-71.
- Rosenzweig, F. (1971) *The Star of Redemption*, London: RKP.
- Tibi, B. (2009) *Islam's Predicament with Modernity*, London: Routledge.
- Tubbs N, (2000) 'Mind The Gap; The Philosophy of Gillian Rose', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 60, Feb.
- Tubbs, N. (2004) *Philosophy's Higher Education*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Tubbs, N. (2005) *Philosophy of the Teacher*, Blackwell: Oxford.
- Tubbs, N. (2008) *Education in Hegel*, London: Continuum.
- Tubbs, N. (2009) *History of Western Philosophy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Williams, R. (1995) 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose' *Modern Theology* 11:1 January, pp 3-22.
- Williams, R. (2000) *Lost Icons*. London: Morehouse Publishing.
- Williams, R. (2008) *Dostoevsky*, London: Continuum.
- Zizek, S. (1996) *The Indivisible Remainder*, London: Verso.