



THE CULTURE OF DIVERSITY AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING IN ARAB ISLAMIC THOUGHT DURING THE “CLASSICAL AGE”

Said Bensaid al Alaoui ●

I – Introduction

The “Classical Age” – in the sense that we use the term – refers to the period between the birth of Arab Islamic culture and the stage when it reached the pinnacle of its power and prosperity. Today we usually describe it as the “Arab Islamic heritage”. When we consider that heritage, we find that – regardless of how dynamic and productive it has been at certain times during the course of its existence – we are unable to place it in a particular historical period. For example, while we can say that “*’Asr al Tadris*” (the “Age of Scholarship”) saw the birth and burgeoning of numerous branches of Islamic knowledge – all of them related to the Holy Qur’an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (particularly *Hadith*) – it would also be true to say that numerous other sciences associated with the Islamic heritage did not reach their zenith until later, when they began to emerge fully fledged in various parts of the Islamic world.



It would also be wrong to tie the heritage exclusively to “*Asr al Tadwin*” (the “Age of Literary Output”), since this would ignore the numerous Islamic sciences that saw the light of day during the fourth and fifth centuries AH, as well as the previously unrecognized centres of learning – such as Cairo, Cordoba and Fez (to name but a few) – in which those sciences came to fruition.

It would therefore be true to say that Arab Islamic culture evolved and reached maturity over a relatively lengthy period of time, during which its centre of gravity shifted from one major city to another. Hence we should not focus solely upon “*Asr al Tadwin*”; instead, it would be more accurate to speak of a “flexible and itinerant Classical Age”.

To arrive at a clearer understanding of what the “Classical Age of Arab Islamic thought” – or the Arab Islamic heritage – actually means, it would be useful to clarify two points. Firstly, we have borrowed the term “Classical Age” from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who used it in his studies of Western thought. However, this does not mean that we are restricting it to the same parameters in our treatment of the Arab Islamic heritage as he did in his “*Archaeology of Knowledge*”. (In Foucault’s view the description “Classical” ought not to be applied to the seventeenth century; in his book “*A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*” he preferred to use the epithet “Great” in recognition of the fact that the seventeenth century saw the birth of modern philosophy and represented the essence of Western European knowledge from the time of the Renaissance and the Copernican revolution – developments which paved the way for the huge transformation that Western Europe’s thought and society were destined to undergo from the latter part of the eighteenth century.)

Secondly, although we regard “Classical Age” as a more convenient term than “*Asr al Tadwin*” (or “Age of Literary Output”) for helping us to understand and analyse our subject (since “Classical” has the meaning of “model,” “point of reference” or “yardstick”), we concede that these three epithets cannot be applied solely to a particular era – in this case the second and third centuries AH or even a shorter timescale than that, since historically Arab Islamic culture continues through the “*Asr al Tadwin*” to some of the later periods.

A proper survey of Arab Islamic culture, including its origins and development until it reached its “final destination,” will take us through all the historical stages leading up to the post-Classical period that has been called “*Asr al Inhitat*” (the “Age of Decadence”). In this connection, we feel it would be practical to use the terms “point of reference” and “yardstick” when discussing those aspects of the Arab Islamic heritage that we most cherish and regard as supreme examples of Arab Islamic civilization.

In this introduction we should like to summarise the proposition that we intend to put forward in this article as follows: **It is our view that Arab Islamic culture in the “Classical Age” was – first and foremost – a culture based upon a recognition and acceptance of “differences” and that it sought to enter into a dialogue with “the different other” that was subject to precise rules and conditions.** In fact, we could say that the Arab Islamic “Classical Age” was the epitome of an interactive, pluralistic and diverse culture that was not afraid to engage in debate.

II – Diversity awareness in the “Islamic Classical Age”

1 – It is well known that Abu ‘Uthman al Jahiz was infatuated with the Arabic language and took great pride in his Arab roots. In fact, his passion for the Arabs exceeded all bounds and he wrote several books championing them and attacking *shu’ubiyyah* (hostility of non-Arab subjects to the status of the Arabs in the Islamic *Ummah*). Of his many writings on these topics, this extract from *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin* (*The Book of Eloquence and Demonstration*) may be of interest:

“It was our desire – may Allah preserve you – to begin this second part of *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin* by responding to the *shu’ubiyah*’s defamatory attack on Arab orators on the grounds of the nature of their oaths and because they relied upon the robust approach with stick in hand.”¹ In al Jahiz’s view, delivering a public speech with a stick in one’s hand and being prepared to use it reflected a distinctive trait of the Arab character, and he devotes a whole section of *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin* to “the stick”. Indeed, it could

¹ Al Jahiz: *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin*: Al Futuh al Adabiyyah Press, Cairo, 1332 AH, Part 2, p. 2.



be argued that the subject as treated by al Jahiz merits a semiological study, since in such a case semantic analysis and semiology are more effective tools for understanding the underlying meaning than language and linguistics alone. However, that is not our purpose in this article. We prefer to look at the text from another angle – that of the mentalities of the people involved and the history of ideas – since in our opinion these will give us a clearer picture of the way the Arabs saw the world and classified its different cultures and peoples; after all, it was at a time when the Arabs were saturated in the dominant culture, and at a critical juncture in the genesis of Arab Islamic thought in the Classical Age.

In *Kitab al 'Asa (The Book of the Stick)* in *Al Bayan wa'l Tabyin* we find the following:

“To sum up, we are not familiar with any examples of rhetoric other than that of the Arabs and Persians. As far as India is concerned, they have sayings written down and bound books in volume form.... The Greeks have philosophy and logic....and the Persians have orators. However, all the words and ideas expressed by the Persians are about theories, *ijtihad* (interpretative judgement) and Sufism...[while] everything the Arabs have is spontaneous and improvised, their orators are more concise and what they say is more straightforward.”¹

As we see from the above paragraph, each (or most) of the major peoples who were known at the time of al Jahiz were recognized as having their own predominant character: India had its adages and ideas, Greece had its philosophy and logic and Persia had its political literature. One thing they all shared with the Arabs, however, was the quality of their rhetoric and eloquence, though the distinguishing feature of Arab rhetoric was its “spontaneity and improvisation,” while the Persians were characterised by their high culture and far-sightedness; however, there were considerable differences between those aspects of their natures that were innate and those that were acquired. If we look at Part 1 of *Al Bayan wa'l Tabyin* we find:

¹ *Al Bayan wa'l Tabyin*, ibid. Part 1, p. 49.

“Mu’awiyah bin Abi Sufyan asked a Bedouin man: ‘What is [the secret of] your eloquence?’ He replied: ‘It is something that boils up in our breasts, so they [i.e. our breasts] eject it onto our tongues’.”¹

Although al Jahiz studied what the Arabs had to say about eloquence and its practitioners, and despite the voluminous quantities of prose and poetry he quotes, and his numerous references to pre-Islamic and Islamic poets and orators (and the speeches of princes and men of letters), he nevertheless continued to carry out his own investigations into the essential concept of eloquence and the differences that existed on that subject between cultures and peoples. In this connection, I should like to ask the reader’s permission to quote another extract from *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin*:

“A Persian was asked: ‘What is eloquence?’ He replied: ‘Knowing how to distinguish *fasl* (parting) from *wasl* (reunion).’ A Greek was asked: ‘What is eloquence?’ He replied: “Verifying the *aqsam* (divisions) and selecting the *kalam* (words/speech).’ A Byzantine was asked: ‘What is eloquence?’ He replied: ‘Keeping to the point when being spontaneous, and elaborating when speaking at length.’ An Indian was asked: ‘What is eloquence?’ He replied: ‘Lucidity of meaning, exploiting appropriate opportunities and being clear in one’s intention.’ One Indian has described it as: ‘Combining insightful reasoning with an understanding of where one’s opportunity lies.’ Then he added: ‘Insightful reasoning and understanding where one’s opportunity lies leads to clarity of expression and an ability to describe by allusion.’ (...) He is also recorded as having said: ‘Combining aptness and knowledge with timing and brevity in a way that succeeds in conveying the meaning indirectly and distracting you from the words used to express it...’ Then he said: ‘With all these fine qualities, it should be comprehensive and balanced, moderate in its language and pure in idiom.’”

If we recognize that what constitutes eloquence – in al Jahiz’s view – varies from one people or culture to another, then the Persians, the Greeks, the Byzantines and the Indians – not to mention the Arabs – can

¹ Ibid. Part 1, p. 54.



all be described as eloquent. The Arabs have their poetry, the Greeks their logic; the Byzantines have their ability to understand how to deal with a situation (sometimes being brief and sticking to the point while at other times – where appropriate – speaking at length); and the Indians have their clarity of expression and an ability to reason. It may therefore be said of the author of *Al Bayan wa'l Tabyin* that he understood that different peoples and cultures interpreted concepts in different ways, while at the same time he was also aware of the fact that things could only be understood properly if those differences were recognized.

2 – Another thinker – Abu al Rayhan al Biruni, who lived in the fifth century AH – also understood the significance of cultural differences. A perusal of his book *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind min Miqulah Maqbulah fi'l 'Aql aw Mardhulah* shows us that he had a good command of the Indian language, since it mentions that he had translated two works into Arabic: “One on principles and the attributes of created beings (...) and the other on freeing the *nafs* (psyche) from its ties to the body.”¹

As well as being a translator, al Biruni was a great traveller and visited numerous countries – both Arab and non-Arab. Like many of his contemporaries who were translators and men of letters, he probably attended the gatherings and salons hosted by the Abbasid Caliphs and the Buwaihid Sultans or other leading dignitaries. It is also not improbable that he would have told those gatherings about his experiences and observations of the countries he had visited, as well as the ways in which their populations differed from the Arabs.

Of his book *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind min Miqulah Maqbulah fi'l 'Aql aw Mardhulah* he said that its aim was to inform and entertain: “It is a book of anecdotes which describes India as it is; then it adds what the Greeks have in similar measure so that a comparison can be made between them.”² Hence his purpose in writing the book was to inform his readers about the ideas and culture of a people who were different from us in every respect:

¹ Abu al Rayhan al Biruni: *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind min Miqulah Maqbulah fi'l 'Aqlaw Mardhulah*, Matbu'at Dar al Ma'arif al 'Uthmaniyyah, Hyderabad, 1958, p. 6.

² *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind min Miqulah Maqbulah fi'l 'Aql aw Mardhulah*, ibid. pp. 5-6.

“The people differ from us in everything which nations share [as common denominators], the first of these being language, even though there may be similar differences between nations....Among these differences are the fact they differ from us totally in their religion; nothing that we [believe in] can be found in their [beliefs] and nothing that they [believe in] can be found in our [beliefs].... They also differ from us in their *rusum* (descriptions) and customs, to the extent that they almost terrify their children with tales about our dress and appearance and attribute devilry to us....”¹

The point to note about al Biruni – and the general intellectual climate at the time he wrote *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind min Miqulah Maqbulah fi'l 'Aql aw Mardhulah* – is his desire (and the desire of his contemporaries) to know about the “different other”. Seen from an existential point of view, the “other” is the “different opposite” which enables the self to define itself, or – as we might say with Hegel – it is a negative definition of the self (an Arab is not an Indian, not a Persian, not a Byzantine, not a Greek, etc.); however, a desire to know the “other” is in one sense a refusal to recognize its difference from the self, and – in another sense – an acceptance of that difference.

3 – Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi presented the three parts of his book *Al Imta' wa'l Mu'anasah (Enjoyment and Intimacy)* as a series of “night time salons” at which the Vizier Abu ‘Abdullah al ‘Aredh relaxed after his day’s labours. Each night a specific topic was discussed; sometimes the discussions were extensive and branched out into various related subjects requiring more than one night before they could be exhausted. The sixth night was devoted to a comparison between the respective merits of the Arabs and the ‘*Ajam* (foreigners, usually Persians) – a subject that was often discussed in Arab salons, particularly among men of letters, who tended to treat it in much the same way as al Jahiz did. As we know, the term “*Ajam*” was commonly used by the Arabs to refer to the “other” – that is, something that is different from, and contrary to, the Arab character, thinking and customs.

¹ Ibid. pp. 13-15.



In *Al Imta' wa'l Mu'anasah* we find the following:

“Then I attended it on another night and the man who opened the session began by asking: ‘Do you prefer the Arabs to the ‘*Ajam* or the ‘*Ajam* to the Arabs?’ I replied: ‘According to the scholars, there are four nations – the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Persians and the Indians. It is therefore difficult to say that the Arabs alone are better than the other three, along with the qualities they share in common and the differences between them....The Persians have politics, literature, *hudud* (definitions) and *rusum* (descriptions), the Byzantines have science and wisdom, the Indians have intellectual qualities, vision, agility, magic and patience, the Turks are courageous and intrepid, the negroes are long-suffering, hard-working and merry, the Arabs are brave, hospitable, faithful, gallant, generous, upholders of right and masters of eloquence and oratory. These virtues in the aforementioned nations are not found in every one of their individual members, but are widely found among them despite the fact that out of all of them there must be someone who possesses none of these [virtues] and may be criticised as having their opposites.’”¹

When comparing the Arabs with the non-Arabs (i.e. the ‘*Ajam*) it is clear that al Tawhidi has already prejudged the issue. In most of his book, the author of *Al Imta' wa'l Mu'anasah* sticks to the same line as the one laid down by al Jahiz – i.e. the Arabs are better than everybody else, since such virtues as the non-Arabs possess are acquired and contrived, whereas in the case of the Arabs they are the product of “inspiration, their pure, unsullied natural disposition, their ebullient mentalities, their free spirits, their noble lineage and their sound customs”.²

In the famous eighth night *munadharah* (debate) on Greek philosophy between Abu Sa'id al Sairafi (who was a passionate apologist for the Arabs and their language) and Abu Bashir Matta bin Yunus (“the Logician”), the winner was the Arab grammarian, not the logician. According to al Tawhidi’s version of the session, the latter was rendered helpless and

¹ Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi: *Al Imta' wa'l Mu'anasah*, edited by Ahmed Amin and Ahmed al Zain, Al Maktabah al 'Asriyyah Publications, Beirut (undated), pp. 70-74.

² Ibid. p. 94.

confused and the Vizier congratulated the winner with the words: “May Allah’s Eye be upon you O Sheikh. You have bedewed livers, brought joy to eyes and whitened faces.”¹

The *munadharah* was an event of major importance and those who took part in it were regarded with awe. Al Tawhidi portrayed Matta bin Yunus as a powerful opponent whom people were afraid to challenge. On the night of the session in question the Vizier asked: “Can’t you delegate someone to debate with Matta on the question of logic. He says....” When those who were present remained silent, the Vizier was angry. Even so, no-one took up the challenge until al Sairafi put himself forward and the duel began. Al Tawhidi’s sympathies were clearly with the grammarian as he faced off against the logician in this battle – an event which is celebrated even today in our Arab Islamic culture.

However, what we need to note here is the fact that it showed an awareness of the difference and “otherness” which existed between the Arabs and the Greeks. Disdainfully, al Sairafi asked: “If logic is something concocted by a man from Greece in the language and idiom of its people and in terms familiar to them, why should the Turks, Indians, Persians and Arabs take it seriously and see it as judge and rule-setter for them and over them? Should they not adopt what suits them and reject what does not?”² At the same time, however, he recognized (implicitly at least) that the logic of the Greeks had potential benefits. Moreover, Arabic was a more than adequate tool for applying it, since it was the “equal of Greek logic” – at least in the case of those who were well-versed in the language.

When an opponent was respected, this meant that he was also recognized. A *munadharah* entailed the use of weapons which could only be effective if one was familiar with the opponent’s ideas and history. The contests portrayed in *Al Imta’ wa’l Mu’anasah* offer us a perfect model of Platonic dialogues in action, with two equally matched opponents, each trying to unseat the other. Ultimately, though, such events can only be

¹ *Al Imta’ wa’l Mu’anasah*, ibid. p. 128.

² Ibid. p. 110.



successful insofar as the participants are familiar with the “different other,” while at the same time observing certain specific rules and respecting an agreed code of conduct.

III – The “culture of difference”

As we can see in *Al Imta’ wa’l Mu’anasah*, a *munadharah* is a debate between two powerful, equally matched opponents – that is to say two opponents, each of whom is as well versed in his intellectual discipline as his opposite number. He must be familiar with his opponent’s ideas and level of knowledge, and able to expose his weaknesses and failings. The *munadharah* between Abu Sa’id al Sairafi and Abu Bashar Matta bin Yunus is an excellent example of this.

With regard to al Tawhidi’s account of the debate when he says of al Sairafi: “He was forty years old on the *yawm* (day) of the *munadharah*,”¹ the point that is of interest to us is not the number (i.e. al Sairafi’s age) but “*yawm*”. In Classical Arab culture’s rich vocabulary the word “*yawm*” is applied to a very specific situation – *yawm al dhullah* (the Day of Overwhelming Gloom) in the Holy Qur’an, *ayyam* (pl. of *yawm*) *al ‘Arab fi’l Jahiliyyah* (the Days of the Arabs in the Time of Ignorance, “days” here meaning “battles” or “skirmishes”), in which the extent to which the victor is able to boast of his victory is determined by the strength and hard-headedness of his opponent. Whenever the word is used in this sense it indicates a recognition and acceptance of the “different other,” with the ultimate judgement on the matter being referred to a Higher Power.

Where Islamic theologians are concerned, *ma’rifah* (knowledge) falls into two general classes. It is either “*dhururiyyah*” (necessary/inescapable – that is to say, knowledge which a person has no option but to accept, such as self-evident truths and direct information) – or “*nadhariyyah*” (theoretical – that is, knowledge determined by theory or speculation, which is dependent upon the intellect and intellectual proof). In theology *ma’rifah* is established solely by means of theory and the application of the intellect.

¹ Ibid. p. 129.

Islamic theologians have various methodologies at their disposal, two of which we shall consider here. One of these – the “negative track” – entails demolishing the opponent’s arguments, while the other – the “positive track” – involves the application of *ijtihad* in support of the theologian’s *ra’i* (opinion). If we express these tracks in theological terms we can say that the theologian is in the position of either a “plaintiff” (in which case he is required to produce evidence) or a “defendant” (who expects his opponent to produce definitive proof).

These methodologies have led to the development of certain rules including – among others:

- **Rule One:** Following a system of “concentric circles” extending outwards from *khas* (specific) to *‘am* (general). We can see one example of this in *Qadi* Abu Bakr Mohammed bin al Tayyib al Baqillani’s *Tamhid (Introduction)*.

After an extensive theological preamble about knowledge, the essence of reality and the transient things of this world, then a proof of the existence of Allah (based on the premise that the first duty imposed by Allah the Most High on a theologian is that he should know Him), al Baqillani examines the claims of those who deny the Divinity in any shape or form, then those who deny prophethood in principle, then those who deny the prophethood of known prophets. From this he proceeds to prove that Muhammad (PBUH) was indeed the Prophet of Islam and rebut the claims of those who deny his Mission. He then discusses Islamic theologians and comes up against a new type of dispute – the dispute between the different Islamic schools. This progression leads him to place the classes of opponents and disputes into different categories, and consequently to the inevitable conclusion that a thorough knowledge of the opponent’s beliefs and arguments is essential so that they can be rebutted. It was on this basis that he and other theologians adopted the formula: “If they say, we say” or “If a speaker says, the response to him is”.

In his book *Al Milal wa’l Nihal (Sects and Creeds)* al Shahrastani says that he also observes this rule: “We refer to their lords and



masters and cite their references and sources...in the language in which they are expressed, after examining their methodologies and carefully scrutinising their principles and the consequences that arise from them.”¹ We also find the first al Ash’ari observing this rule and ascribing a moral dimension to it; in his view it is by observing it or flouting it that a good Muslim can be distinguished from a bad Muslim. In his introduction to his famous work *Maqalat al Islamiyyin wa’khtilaf al Musallin (Discourses of the Proponents of Islam and the Differences among the Worshippers)* Abu’l Hasan al Ash’ari says:

“Anyone wishing to understand religions and distinguish between them must have a knowledge of the different schools and their discourses. In one narration [I have read] I found that when people were talking about discourses and classifying religions and creeds they were either inaccurate or wrong in the things they attributed to their opponents, or – alternatively – deliberate liars seeking to besmirch those who opposed them...**This is not the way followed by the spiritually upright or those who are truly intelligent.**”²

- **Rule Two:** This rule, which complements and clarifies Rule One, may be called the “Rule of Recognition” – that is to say, recognition of one’s opponent and a readiness to listen to his arguments although – or rather because – he is on the opposite side. As we have pointed out earlier, this is something we find in the classification system mentioned by al Baqillani; that is, Muslims – as people who believe in One God – share some attributes with those who recognize the prophethood of Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them). At the same time, all of them belong to the wider “circle” of those who believe in prophethood; moreover, they all accept that there is a Creator, unlike those who deny the Divinity in any shape or form. Coming to the smallest “circle” (where the opponents from the conflicting Islamic schools are gathered), we find ourselves forced to concede that all its

1 Al Shahrastani: *Al Milal wa’l Nihal*, edited by Mohammed Sayyid Kailani, Dar al Ma’rifah, Beirut, 1980, Part 1, p. 11.

2 Abu’l Hasan al Ash’ari: *Maqalat al Islamiyyin wa’khtilaf al Musallin*, edited by Mohammed Muhiyuddin Abdel Hamid, Maktabat al Nahdha al Misriyyah, Cairo, 2nd impression, 1969, p. 33.

occupants are theologians. This confirms al Shahrastani's statement – endorsed by the Islamic theologians – that “even though we may find fault with our opponent, we cannot exclude him from the [‘circle’ of] Islamic theologians”. To put it another way, it would be true to say that the rule for recognizing an opponent and accepting him as an equal (and thus eligible for a theologian to engage in debate with him) entails an acceptance of the fact that there are differences, as well as a willingness to reach a mutual understanding over those points on which there is agreement.

- Rule Three: This requires a distinction to be made between “*maqamat*” (judgements based on reason) and “*ahkam*” (Shariah rulings). There are recorded pronouncements on every “*maqam*” (sing. of *maqamat*) while every “*hukm*” (sing. of *ahkam*) is governed by specific conditions.

Consider this example from al Ghazali's *Al Mustasfa min Usuli'l Fiqh (Conspectus of the Principles of Jurisprudence)*. According to al Ghazali, the ruling that alcohol is *haram* (prohibited) is a Shariah ruling which is only binding upon Muslims, while the judgement that it is a harmful inebriant is a reason-based one based on experience and binding upon all rational people.

We find a broader application of Rule Three in al Shahrastani's *Al Milal wa'l Nihal*, where he states: “*Takfir* (excommunication) is a Shariah ruling, while *taswib* (denial of the possibility of error by a jurist) is a reason-based ruling.” There is a great difference between *takfir* and *takhti'ah* (the converse of *taswib* – i.e. admission of the possibility of error by a jurist) and the rulings on this question are based on more than one source.¹

The fact is that, despite the ferocity of their language and the violence of their discourse, with a very few exceptions the Islamic

¹ Sources: a) Abu Hamid al Ghazali: *Al Mustasfa fi 'Ilmi'l Usul*, edited by Sheikh Mohammed Mustafa Abu'l 'Ala, Maktabat al Gindi, Cairo, 1971, p. 65. b) Al Shahrastani: *Al Milal wa'l Nihal*, ibid. Part 1, p. 203.



theologians observed this rule and recognized the validity of “theoretical knowledge” – i.e. the type of knowledge established by the intellect. A striking example of one of these exceptions is to be found in the chapter on the *Batiniyyah* (Ismaili sect) in ‘Abdul Qahir al Baghdadi’s *Al Farq baina’l Firaq* (*The Difference between Sects*), which states that in the case of the Ismailis *khata’* (error) is no different from *kufr* (unbelief).

IV – “Different otherness” and the adoption of foreign ideas

In the Classical Age Arab Islamic thought was the product of a “culture of *tafahom* (mutual understanding)” – *tafahom* being an interactive process that demonstrates a willingness to accept and recognize the “different other”. In our previous paragraphs we have tried to explain how that willingness manifested itself and show how Arab thought in the Classical Age was “saturated” with the “difference culture” – that is, how it was essentially pluralistic in nature. This meant that Arab Islamic thought at that time was extremely open in its attitude to other cultures and ready to adopt those of their ideas and practices that did not conflict with the actual text of the Qur’an or the Sunnah.

Anyone with an interest in Arab Islamic thought in the Classical Age will find that the adoption of foreign ideas and vocabulary was a normal cultural practice – particularly during its earlier period. Examples of Persian and Greek words finding their way into the Arabic language are too numerous to mention, and a glance at the intellectual output of the first four centuries of the Hijrah will show evidence of activity in a wide range of fields of knowledge, in which the names of al Jahiz, Ibn Qutaybah al Dinawari, al Tawhidi, al Miskawaih, al Mawardi and Ghazali speak for themselves.

Al Fihrist (*The Catalogue*), by Abu’l Faraj Mohammed bin Ishaq al Nadim (usually referred to as Ibn al Nadim; d. 380 AH), is a work of leading importance for anyone with an interest in the history of Arab Islamic thought. The author was a *warraq* (bookseller/stationer/paper-seller) and his shop was a meeting place for writers and lovers

of literature and the arts. According to one story told by Ibn al Nadim, *warraqs* were people who travelled far and wide, and during the course of their journeys they met people of various nations who spoke a number of languages and bought books from them. People did not only seek out the *warraq* so that they could buy books from him; they also used to borrow books so that they could copy them, either for their own personal use or on behalf of certain viziers and other dignitaries. In this connection, Ibn al Nadim reported that al Jahiz was said to rent the *warraqs'* shops so that he could spend the night in them browsing through their books, and that on one occasion he was almost smothered under the books because, as he was an old man at the time, he was unable to bear their weight.

The point that is relevant to us here is that *warraqs* used to have large quantities of scrapbooks and registers in which they catalogued the books and writers they came across. *Al Fihrist* contains a comprehensive inventory of the biographies of Ibn al Nadim's contemporaries as well as information on the earlier periods and extensive data about the original works and translations that were commonly to be found in scholarly circles. It therefore constitutes a rich source of what historians and students of the humanities have described as "unintended testimony" (which also includes commercial records, court rolls, registers etc.).

In addition to a number of well-known works translated from Greek into Arabic via Syriac, there are eleven Arabic translations from the Persian. While most of these consist of sagas about kings and chronicles of ancient civilizations, they also include short pieces in which the writer speculates on the reasons behind the rise and fall of nations. Ibn al Nadim's *Fihrist* also records seventeen books translated from the Indian language and covering such topics as politics, administration, biography and what the authors call "advice to kings or mirrors of princes".¹

¹ Abu'l Faraj ibn al Nadim: *Al Fihrist*, Dar al Ma'rifah, Beirut, undated, p.p. 331-441.



In addition to these, there is a rich collection of other source material which – for the reasons we have already explained – is certain to prove invaluable for historians of the development of ideas since it gives a picture of the intellectual climate of that period of the Islamic Classical Age.

Elsewhere in the Muslim world, an examination of the many original works and translations by jurists, philosophers and doctors of medicine in Andalusia will reveal another aspect of that era’s readiness to accept the “culture of the different other” as well as numerous examples of cultural cross-pollination. In his ground-breaking treatise on Ibn Miskawaih Mohammed Arkoun speaks of “*al insiyyah al ‘Arabiyyah*” (“Arab humanism”) – a concept that inspired several of our historians and thinkers (and a number of Westerners) to pay tribute to Andalusia’s spirit of inter-cultural dialogue and its highly positive attitude towards cultural appropriation, of which we can cite numerous examples.¹

This cultural appropriation, which we have described as “highly positive,” was a model of successful adaptation. It made a creative contribution to the intellectual output of writers in a range of different fields, including works of literature such as ibn Qutaybah al Dinawari’s *‘Uyun al Akhbar (The Choicest Chronicle)*, al Jahiz’s *Al Bayan wa’l Tabyin*, the works of al Tawhidi, Miskawaih and al Mawardi such as *Adab al Dunya wa’l Din (Worldly and Religious Literature)*, *Tas-hil al Nadhar (Simplified View)* and *Nasihah al Muluk (Advice to Kings)*. Philosophical writings during this period include the works of al Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Baja (Avempace) and Ibn Tufail, all of whom were destined to become celebrated names in the history of world philosophy.

¹ In particular we should like to refer the reader to:

Said Bensaïd al Alaoui: *Al Khitab al Ash’ari: Musahamah fi Dirasat al ‘Aql al ‘Arabi al Islami*, Muntada al Ma’arif, Beirut, 2nd impression, 2010, Part 2, pp. 215-290.

Said Bensaïd al Alaoui: *Dawlat al Khilafah: Dirasah fi’l Tafkir al Siyasi ‘inda’l Mawardi*, Manshurat Kulliyat al Adab wa’l ‘Ulum al Insaniyyah, Rabat, 2nd impression, 2010.

Said Bensaïd al Alaoui: *Khitab al Shar’iyyah al Siyasiyyah fi’l Islam al Sunni*, Dar Ru’yah, Cairo, 2009.



In conclusion, we can say that Arab Islamic culture during its prime – that is to say, during what we have called the Classical Age – was a model of a “dialogue culture”. It was a culture of openness that was happy to accept the “different other” and refused to submit to the closed attitudes, intellectual restrictions and denial of freedom imposed by black and white absolutes. Cultural dialogue differs from absolutist ideology in the same way that openness differs from dogmatism, freedom from slavery, and fertile creativity from sterile imitation. For numerous reasons Arab Islamic thought during the Classical Age was a shining example for us to learn from and follow.