The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 543–545.
© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of University of Notre Dame. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.
doi:10.1017/S0034670524000305

Is European Thought Islamic?

Humeira Iqtidar

The two distinct audiences Namazi identifies for his book are those interested in either Strauss or medieval Islamic philosophy. But his engrossing study of Strauss's engagement with Islamic political thought carries value for a wider audience beyond these specializations. Considering Strauss's engagement with medieval Islamic philosophy raises questions of significance regarding the relationship between European and Islamic thought. Namazi does not raise these questions directly, but this thoughtful study is valuable for those looking to understand and delineate the distinctiveness of European thought.

Namazi presents a close reading of Strauss's writings on medieval Islamic thought, including published as well as two recently discovered pieces, to argue that these allow insight into Strauss's use of "pedagogical esotericism" (42). This kind of esoteric writing is aimed at training future philosophers to read and think critically. Strauss's opinions regarding esotericism have generated much heated debate. Adrian Blau, for example, argues that the problem is "not Strauss's *esoteric* method, but *Strauss's* esoteric method."[1] From this perspective, the problem is not esoteric interpretation per se but the particular way in which Strauss decodes some texts. From any standpoint, though, esoteric writing is complicated and interpreting it even more so.

Namazi contends that other scholars have tended to disregard or underplay the place of pedagogical esotericism in Strauss's writings, but it is of "fundamental" importance to Strauss (42). Strauss writes in an esoteric manner primarily to train other philosophers. This becomes easier to understand once we recognize that for Strauss, philosophy is not a set of doctrines but "a way of life dedicated to the search for truth" (42). Philosophers need to train students, the select few committed to philosophy, by writing in a way that requires close and careful reading conducive to this search. To complicate matters further, Namazi suggests that Strauss "rarely, if ever, speaks in his own name" (37). Instead, his commentaries present specific arguments that can go beyond the ideas proposed by the thinkers he writes about. Some of this extension and commentary is on display in this book's sections on Al-Farabi (chapters 3 and 4) and the *Arabian Nights* (chapter 2).

King's College London, Strand, London, United Kingdom
I thank Adrian Blau for a very helpful conversation and comments.

[1]Adrian Blau, "Anti-Strauss," *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 1 (January 2012): 143, emphasis original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670524000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Namazi details how Strauss's appreciation of esoteric writing is indebted to his engagement with medieval Islamic thought. While Strauss wrote more explicitly in his published work about his discovery of esotericism through Maimonides, in private letters he spoke about Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) alongside Maimonides (15). Strauss had worked backwards from Spinoza to Maimonides to Ibn Rushd. Once introduced to medieval Islamic philosophers he remained fascinated for the rest of his life. This was in large part due to the depth and sophistication of their study of Greek philosophy. Strauss acknowledged this explicitly, and from 1929, after he was introduced to the works of Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd, and Al-Farabi, his engagement with Islamic Platonic philosophy as well as esoteric writing as a method deepened and continued for the rest of his career.

Strauss's influence on American political philosophy and the continued scholarly interest in esoteric methods are both undeniable. It is, then, even more noteworthy that his work on Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd has not received more attention. Namazi convincingly establishes the importance of both for Strauss and argues for recognizing the depth of Strauss's study of medieval Islamic scholarship. However, the claim on the book's cover that Strauss is "one of the most innovative historians and scholars of Islamic thought of all time" comes without any engagement with the now significant body of Euro-American academic scholarship on Islamic thought. Admittedly, much of it is concentrated in departments other than Philosophy but its range and sophistication deserves greater attention. Nor does Namazi engage with skillful scholars and interpreters of Islamic thought and philosophy who operate outside university settings, for instance in *madaris* (singular: *madrassa*). This book allows us to view Strauss as an innovative and relatively unique scholar of Islamic thought within a specific group, that is among twentieth-century Euro-American philosophers and historians of political thought.

This uniqueness demands some consideration. Through most of the twentieth and twenty first centuries, most Euro-American students were, and still are, introduced to political theory with a few sessions on Plato, sometimes Aristotle, before skipping ahead some fifteen centuries to Aquinas, then Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and so on. The role of philosophers from the Islamic empires of North Africa and Southern Europe in preserving and extending through detailed commentary and interpretation the work of Greek philosophers, during what were known as the Dark Ages of Europe, does not normally feature. Strauss saw these medieval Islamic philosophers as part of a longer conversation with the Greek masters who form the foundation of the European canon. Perhaps he was more alert to these connections because of his interest in Jewish thought at a time when Jews and Muslims had both been written out of European history. The second half of the twentieth century has seen some recognition,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670524000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press

albeit limited, of Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage, but none so far of the Muslim contribution.

The canon is beginning to change. Over the last two decades Euro-American political theorists and historians of political thought have increasingly acknowledged Eurocentrism. However, as we move beyond that initial stage of acknowledgment, a much more complex question arises about what counts as European thought.[2] If we recognize that Europe is a subcontinent of Asia without a clear border dividing the two, or that the Mediterranean region including today's Greece, Turkey, North Africa, and Southern Europe have a long, shared history, or that large parts of Europe were governed by Muslims for seven hundred years, how would that change our definition of "European" thought? Postcolonial theorists have long argued that we cannot assume a simple binary between the West and non-West. Often the burden of this claim has been borne by the observation that the West, through colonial and capitalist intrusion, is everywhere. European history has global reach by virtue of Europe being the birthplace of global capitalism. Western categories and modes of thinking are deeply embedded now in the non-West. All of this may be valid, and yet the question remains: which version of European history, and which Europe we are talking about?

Asking "What Is Western about Western Thought?" Suditpa Kaviraj draws a helpful distinction between European history and European theory, and reminds us that provincializing one does not automatically lead to a clear understanding of the contours of the other. We may now understand better how and when Europe and the West came to be seen as the same thing[3] as well as being distinctive from the rest of the world. But, we also need to investigate how a particular version of Europe came to dominate European theory and what implications this carries. There are, after all, many different wests within the West. Kaviraj proposes finding "a criterion of distinction between different modes in which thinking can be characterized as 'Western.'"[4] That larger project will, no doubt, be taken up by many in the coming decades. Namazi's engaging study has the benefit of laying the groundwork for us to ask the question: Is European thought also Islamic?

[2]Humeira Iqtidar, "Addressing Eurocentrism in History of Political Thought," *Scienza and Politica*, XXXV, no. : 255–8.

[3]Georgios Varouxakis, "When Did Britain Join the Occident? On the Origins of the Idea of "the West" in English," *History of European Ideas* 46, no. 5 (2020): 563–81.

[4]Sudipta Kaviraj, "What Is Western about Western Thought?," *Sophia* 62, no. 3 (2023): 485–514, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11841-023-00963-2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670524000305 Published online by Cambridge University Press