**Contemplating the Philosophers of the Golden Age of Islam**

[Dr Wardella Doschek](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/dr-wardella-doschek/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Dr%20Wardella%20Doschek)

August 16, 2021

“Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.”

“The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary

Being who brought all existence into being.”

“Four traits lift a person to the highest ranks, even if their works and knowledge are little: forbearance, humility, generosity, and good character. This is the perfection of faith.”

These three quotations comprise a part of a thought experiment proposed by Akbar Ahmed in his latest book, The Flying Man, Aristotle, and the Philosophers of the Golden Age of Islam: Their Relevance Today. The above mentioned three quotations are taken from the writings of Al-Ghazali, a prominent Muslim philosopher; from the works of Maimonides, the most important Jewish philosopher of that age; and from Saint Thomas Aquinas, the most significant philosopher of the Catholic Church. All three great philosophers belong to the Golden Age of Islam, but it is impossible to tell while reading the quotations that which of the three quotations was written by which philosopher as their sayings are demonstrating the great commonalities among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. (The first quotation is by Aquinas, the second one is by Maimonides, and the third one is by Al-Ghazali).

During the Golden Age of Islam, traditionally dated from the ninth century to the thirteenth century, and relatively coexist with the Middle or so-called Dark Ages in Europe from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, an enormous number of scholars and philosophers have lived and worked together, primarily in the Muslim world. They were influenced by each other and, particularly by the works of the Greek philosophers who had lived many centuries before them. Without the work of these great polymaths, it is entirely possible that the wisdom of the Greeks would have vanished. Not only did the Muslim philosophers translate the work of the Greek philosophers, they greatly expanded on it while laying the groundwork for the eventual Renaissance in Europe.

Similar to Ahmed’s previous works, The Flying Man reiterates how incorrect the perception of West about Islam is.

Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, is a widely recognized and highly regarded anthropologist, Islamic scholar, poet, playwright, and filmmaker. He has also been a bridge builder among people and faiths throughout his entire career. To utilize his time during the Corona Virus pandemic, Ahmed decided to study the plethora of philosophers who worked and interacted during the Golden Age of Islam. He chose four Muslim philosophers for extended studies: Avicenna, Al-Ghazali, Averroes, and Ibn-Arabi, in addition to Maimonides (Judaism) and Aquinas (Christianity). The perception in most of the West is that Islam has little to offer except hatred and violence. Similar to Ahmed’s previous works, The Flying Man reiterates how incorrect the perception of West about Islam is.

The flying man, referred to in the title, is a thought experiment proposed by Avicenna. If a man is created by God in space with his limbs outstretched, unable to see or hear; would he still be aware of his existence? Avicenna argued that although the man may not be aware of his body, he will still be aware of the existence of his “self” or “soul.”

All the philosophers of the Golden Age of Islam were concerned with seeking knowledge, what Ahmed calls the “ilm-ethos.” They had different points of view, but all were influenced in one way or another by the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle. The substantial questions they grappled with included the nature of the universe, the nature of God, and the question of resurrection after death. Avicenna’s ideas resonate with that of Aristotle, making him unpopular with some, although his ideas regarding the separation of the body and soul were more in line with that of Plato. Al-Ghazali pushed back against Avicenna’s position in favor of a more traditionally Islamic one, but he, too, gave considerable credit to Aristotle. Al-Ghazali’s ideas greatly influenced Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and further influenced Jewish and Christian thinking. Finally, Ibn-Arabi was concerned with the mystical tradition of Islam, Sufism, which in turn has influenced the mystical traditions of both Judaism and Christianity.

The philosophers that Ahmed discusses had a number of things in common in their personal lives. They were all polymaths. Their work was not confined to any one field of study, and they made important contributions to mathematics, medicine, chemistry, and astronomy in addition to their work in philosophy. They frequently excelled in poetry. Amid the difficulties of lives, they remained devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and produced prodigious amounts of work. Most importantly, they created an intellectual tradition that would define the Muslim world for centuries, a tradition that needs to be revived.

So what relevance do these great men of the past have for today’s world? What lessons do they teach us in the 21st century? What advice can they give us at present times when there is a possibility of destruction of civilization? Contemporary world is marred with rapid climate change, wildfires, storms, desiccation of water resources, rising sea levels, a pandemic that has caused millions of deaths worldwide, racial and religious strife in numerous parts of the world as the fear of the ‘other’ seems more important than getting acquainted with the ‘other’ as advocated by the Quran, and the rise of authoritarianism and hatred of the ‘other’.

Ahmed suggests a number of answers to these questions. I will leave their details for the readers to discover for themselves. But the most important one is that this is not the first time that Humankind has encountered challenging problems and that each of the problems can be resolved by the application of reason and the hope that comes from faith. This is the basic lesson that one learns from studying the works of the great Greek, Muslim, Jewish and Christian philosophers, as well as the philosophers of other faiths.

Perhaps, this seems overly optimistic, but optimism is necessary for Humankind to survive and thrive. The optimism of The Flying Man is a great gift that Akbar Ahmed has given us during these trying times. We owe him a debt of gratitude.

*The writer is a Secretary/Treasurer of the Muslim Women’s Association of Washington, and has authored Straight and Sensible: My Journey to the Straight Path of Islam.*