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Larry Benjamin Miller

Islamic Disputation Theory

The Uses & Rules of Argument in Medieval Islam

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To
Lulu and David
κοινὰ γὰρ τὰ τῶν φιλῶν
and
Rudolph Mach
οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸς ὁ λόγος

Foreword

Readers who, in the current volume, are first learning of this work and its author may be surprised to hear Larry Benjamin Miller's doctoral dissertation pronounced one of the more important contributions to Islamic Studies from the latter half of the twentieth century. This itself is a symptom of the considerable disciplinary void occasioned by its *not* being published—as it most certainly ought to have been—close after its acceptance in October 1984 by the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. That is to say, *Islamic Disputation Theory* is a field-founding study of an essential discipline in Islamicate Intellectual History: the theory and practice of dialectic, as developed under such rubrics as *jadal*, *khilāf*, *munāẓara*, and the *ādāb al-baḥth*. But absent the publication of Miller's pioneering dissertation, its field of study has—until quite recently—lain dormant. It was therefore of considerable moment to learn that—after languishing for 35 years as an unindexed, typewritten photocopy—*Islamic Disputation Theory* was finally to be published; it was of considerable delight to be invited to write its preface.

Why is this such a seminal work? The reasons are many, and stem from the importance of the field which Miller explores as well as the qualities and insights of his exploration. Though a handful of respected Islamicists had scouted certain shallows and bays of the vast ocean of Islamicate dialectical theory and practice,[1] Miller was the first to sound its depths and sketch its coastlines in systematic fashion. His broad survey (though it was, and remains, impossible to be fully comprehensive),

[1] See Josef van Ess, "Disputationspraxis in der Islamischen Theologie. Eine Vorläufige Skizze," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 44 (1976): 23–60; *idem* "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, ed. G. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970): 21–50; George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); *idem* "Dialectic and Disputation. The relation between the Texts of Qirqisani and Ibn ʿAqil," in P. Salmon (ed.): *Mélanges d'islamologie. Volume dédié à la mémoire de Armand Abel*, (Leiden: 1974–78), vol. I, pp. 201–206; Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Ǧadal bei aṭ-Ṭūfī, eine Interpretation seiner Beispielsammlung," in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement III, 1. (Wiesbaden: 1977), pp. 463–473; and G. Vajda, "Etudes sur Qirqisānī V: Les règles de la controverse dialectique," in *Revue des Etudes Juives* 122 (1963): pp. 7–74.

coupled with his logical analyses, revealed a series of rich and evolving genres of dialogical argument, directing us towards what, in the end, has proven to be a large and influential body of theory traditions cultivated in hundreds of treatises, commentaries, supercommentaries, and glosses.

As is now evident, dialectics is both an essential field and a powerful dynamic in premodern Islamicate intellectual history. Thousands of copies of disputation-theory manuscripts in collections the world over attest to this, as do hundreds of Muslim scholars—by speech and act—in their argumentative works, bio-bibliographies, and histories. Moreover, the elaboration of dialectical theory was both an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary pursuit; currents of dialectical teachings and practices energized the argumentative domains of law, theology, philosophy, and grammar, permeating their boundaries and invigorating other disciplines besides.

As noted, the full purview of Islamicate dialectics may be too vast to entertain a truly comprehensive study; and as a field of study it is also too much in its infancy—although, since Miller's dissertation, a few scholars have made contributions of broad scope.[2] But even the most truncated historical overview of relevant literature, as follows, suggests the complex development and surprising radius of Islamicate dialectical theory.

From the beginning, we may observe an evolution from "proto-systems" of dialectical teachings and practices into "full-system" theory treatises, shaped by both the intradisciplinary objectives and interdisciplinary strategies of polymath dialecticians. The transition from pre- to early Islam witnessed a plurality of disputation practices infused with new Islamic axioms. A proto-system with regular disputation formulae is evident in the earliest extant works of religious scholarship, with an already sophisticated dialectic exemplified by such as Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) and companions, al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), and others; law, theology, and grammar were forged in regular disputation.

Refutational treatises and *ikhtilāf* (disagreement) literature proliferated, and the transition from proto-system teachings to full-system theories is evident in the composition of *jadal* works by such as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868 or 9), Ibn Saḥnūn (d. 256/870), Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 245/860 or 298/910), Ibn Surayj (d. 306/918), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), Thaʿlab al-Naḥwī (d. 291/903), and others. By the end of the fourth/tenth century, full-system juristic dialectic had emerged in *jadal* treatises by such students of Ibn Surayj as al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (d. 336/948 or 365/976) and in *uṣūl* and *khilāf* works by such as al-Karkhī (d. 340/952), al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981), Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), and others. At the same time, the systematization of dialectic in theological contexts continued—largely in reaction to Ibn

[2] See, in particular, Abdessamad Belhaj, *Argumentation et Dialectique en Islam: Formes et Séquences de la Munāẓara* (Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2010); Amir Dziri, *Die Ars Disputationis in der islamischen Scholastik: Grundzüge der muslimischen Argumentations- und Beweislehre* (Freiburg, Br.: Kalām, 2015); and chap. 2 of Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

al-Rāwandī[3]—with al-Balkhī (d. 319/931), al-Qirqisānī (d. after 325/937), al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935), al-Māturīdī (d. btwn. 332–6/943–7), al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), and others.

From philosophical circles, early encounters with Aristotelian dialectic were possibly enhanced through the logic of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 139/756) and a known early translation of the *Topics* by Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (d. 207/823). Translations and commentaries on the *Topics* and/or *Sophistical Elenchi* were produced in the circle of al-Kindī (d. ca. 252/866), and by such as Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 298/910-11), Abū ʿUthmān al-Dimashqī (d. after 302/914), Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/940), Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (d. 363/974), and others, culminating in the expansions on these works by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037). Entwined with rhetoric, a belletristic *jadal* theory was developed by Ibn Wahb al-Kātib (fl. ca. 335/946), while *jadal* theory for historiographical contexts is found in the work of Abū Zayd al-Maqdisī (fl. ca. 355/966).

The fifth/eleventh through seventh/thirteenth centuries saw a number of important developments. First, full-system juristic *jadal* evolved, reaching a high stage of remarkably detailed and comprehensive works by al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083), al-Bājī (d. 474/1081), Ibn ʿAqīl (d. 513/1119), al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and others. And in the juristic *ʿilm al-khilāf*, a pair of sub-genres emerged, with *Ṭarīqa* works by al-Marwazī (d. 461/1069), Raḍī al-Dīn al-Nīsābūrī (d. 544/1149), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Rukn al-Dīn al-ʿAmīdī (d. 615/1218), Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), and others;, and *Taʿlīqa* works by al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʿlā (d. 458/1066), al-Qāḍī Abū Muḥammad al-Nasafī (d. 533/1138), Abū Manṣūr al-Barawī (d. 567/1172), and others. Other *khilāf* works were authored, as well, including a didactic poem by Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142) which attracted no less than 17 commentaries. And it is in this period we see the root of a new, streamlined method of *jadal/khilāf* which—flowing from al-Nīsābūrī's *Ṭarīqa* to al-ʿAmīdī's *Ṭarīqa*, and thence to Burhān al-Dīn al-Nasafī's (d. 687/1288) *Fuṣūl*—was eventually universalized by Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d. 722/1322) as the new genre of the *ādāb al-baḥth*.

Elsewhere, full-system grammar *jadal* progressed; *ikhtilāf* literature not only flourished in law, but appeared in theology and even astronomy; and the influence of juristic *khilāf* method was evident even in medical disputation theory. Importantly, in the seventh/thirteenth century, juristic *jadal* evolved yet further, as exemplified by the works of al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 656/1258), Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 716/1316), and others, receiving significant stimulation with the impressive commentary tradition on Ibn al-Ḥājib's *Mukhtaṣar* (eventually numbering over 90 commentaries and 40 supercommentaries and glosses).

Finally, several commentaries on the aforementioned *Fuṣūl* of Burhān al-Dīn al-Nasafī were composed, including one by his student Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī. And it was al-Samarqandī (as Miller first showed us) who adapted al-Nasafī's

[3] As Miller shows us at the start of his chapter on Theological Dialectic.

jadal/khilāf into his universalist dialectical theory works, the most famous being his *Risāla fī Ādāb al-Baḥth*. The *Risāla* was eventually to attract over 50 commentaries, supercommentaries, glosses, and superglosses, right into modern times. More importantly, it encouraged additional primary works with their own commentary traditions, often authored by eminent figures of post-classical Islamic intellectual history.

Thus, a new era in dialectic had begun by the eighth/fourteenth century. ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's (d. 756/1355) single-folio *ādāb al-baḥth* treatise eventually attracted some 45 commentaries and glosses. An *ādāb al-baḥth* work attributed to al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) also attracted a handful—one is still taught today in the Dars-i Niẓāmī curriculum. And by the end of the tenth/sixteenth century, there had appeared at least eight more primary works, by such as Ṭāshkubrī Zādah (d. 968/1560), with over a dozen commentaries and glosses, and Muḥammad al-Birkawī (Birgevi; d. 981/1573), with around seven. Not only did commentaries on al-Samarqandī and al-Ījī flourish, but several spawned their own gloss and super-commentary traditions; for example, al-Shirwānī al-Rūmī's (fl. ca. 840/1436) commentary on the former garnered over 22 glosses with over a dozen super-glosses, while al-Tabrīzī al-Ḥanafī's commentary on the latter garnered ten glosses—one of which generated another ten super-glosses. Juristic *jadal* also continued to evolve in the works of Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), and others. Writings on Ibn al-Ḥājib's *Mukhtaṣar* exploded with over 70 commentaries, many by luminaries—one by al-Ījī eventually attracting 20 glosses, including by such well-known figures as Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1390).

The eleventh/seventeenth through thirteenth/ninteenth centuries brought over 20 more primary *ādāb al-baḥth* works by such as Ḥusayn al-Adanavī (fl. 1070–90/1660–80), with a self-commentary having eight glosses, and Sājaqlī Zādah (d. 1145 or 50/1732 or 37), with nine commentaries, and a spate of didactic poems with commentaries. In the same period writings on the treatises of al-Samarqandī, al-Ījī, al-Birkawī, Ṭāshkubrī Zādah, and others continued to be produced. Certain Ottoman scholars—e.g., al-Sīvāsī (fl. 1109/1698), al-Tīrāwī (d. 1123/1711), and al-Ḥifnī (d. 1176/1763)—wrote commentaries and glosses on more than one primary work, while also contributing their own primary *ādāb al-baḥth* treatises. Finally, in the fourteenth/twenieth century, alongside commentaries on older treatises, over seven new primary *ādāb* works were composed. Some, like the *Ādāb al-Baḥth wa'l-Munāẓara* of Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1393/1973) remain quite popular.

Again, even a much-abridged chronological overview like the above exposes a rich set of evolving traditions with a broad scope of disciplinary applications. Moreover, being such a refined and ultimately rational body of discourse (it is, after all, about putting logic into dialogical practice), the whole of it—spanning well over a millennium—constitutes a major event in the history of thought. And for those who know anything about it, it was Larry Miller, in his *Islamic Disputation Theory*, who sank the first truly significant foundation stone for its study.

Significantly, Miller's dissertation delivered more than a survey and detailed analysis (important in its own right) of a significant portion of the above-mentioned authors and works. *Islamic Disputation Theory* is itself theory-forging—both directly, by presenting a new developmental theory, and indirectly, by exerting a new pressure on intellectual historians, through the application of new lenses and instruments, to recognize and accurately portray the argumentative glue holding entire disciplines together (and, importantly, weaving them seamlessly to each other): dialectic. More refined and accurate accountings of various trajectories in Islamicate intellectual history have been and can be made, subsequent to and drawing upon Miller's work. This is greatly facilitated by his study of what constitutes the real rational lexicon and argumentative grammar of Muslim intellectuals across five critical centuries and multiple disciplines.

In similar fashion, *Islamic Disputation Theory* is also paradigm-forging. Miller provides not only Islamicate dialectic's first historical trajectory for subsequent scholars to refine and build upon, but models of dialectical genre-categories, replete with logical analyses exposing the intertwining of variant but related trends in Islamicate argument theory. This is a handy resource for scholars at all levels who are approaching this imposing body of thought, and its equally imposing literary record, for the first time—or for the hundredth. I say "for the hundredth" because I have myself probably referred back to Miller over a hundred times; and each time I do, I rediscover some fresh insight he had revealed back in the early 1980s. This is certainly not a book that can be digested in one sitting; it must be kept at hand for repeated reference.

Likewise, *Islamic Disputation Theory* is method-forging. Miller practices an efficient technique for exploring difficult technical genres of logic and argumentation theory, sorting and defining distinct genres and trends through contentual and argumentative analysis. In so doing, he also accomplishes the invaluable service of procurement—of making available—bringing to light and summarizing important contributions from numerous difficult to obtain, yet vitally important, sources, several of which remain only in manuscript to this day.

Finally, *Islamic Disputation Theory* is lexicon-forging. Miller gathers together, translates, and brings to light for the first time the technical lexicon—and to an appreciable extent, the technical idiom—of a much-studied premodern discipline, a core *madrasa* topic. Once learned from Miller, these terms and manners of expression appear suddenly to the initiate like well-emblazoned markers stamped all throughout the rational literature of Islam. The terms, concepts, and idioms revealed and translated by Miller constitute the key to huge swathes of what could only otherwise be obscure and difficult argumentative material, in hundreds of important volumes. After reading Miller's dissertation, one returns to one's discipline (especially if it is within law, theology, or philosophy) with a new sight. The marks of dialectic are truly wherever argument is to be found in Islamicate intellectual history, i.e., everywhere.

Simply put, *Islamic Disputation Theory* should have been published 35 years ago, and it is a real shame that it was not. It ought to have been the foundation stone for a new, vital field for Islamic studies. Courses in Islamicate dialectics—with *Islamic Disputation Theory* as a primary reading—ought to have been taught across Islamic Studies institutions from the late 1980s through to this day, and by now there ought to be dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles in this vast field. In other words, Islamic Studies has suffered in the absence of this volume. Happily, however, it can now reach the wider audience it has long deserved, and the field can roll forward with new vigor.

Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University Walter Edward Young
Montreal, QC, Canada
November 16, 2019

Preface

This book is a slightly revised version of my Princeton University dissertation which I completed in the spring of 1984 and submitted to the Department of Near Eastern Studies. Many of the works that I consulted were only available to me in the manuscript libraries in Europe and the Middle East. Many have since been edited and published. I have not been able to keep up with developments in Islamic studies and did not attempt to consult the printed editions of these manuscripts or more recent scholarship. I made a few changes to the final chapter and added some references that I had written in the margins of my copy of my dissertation.

I am hopeful that this revised edition will spark the interest of intellectual historians, medievalists, classicists, and philosophers.

I am also grateful to Dr. Walter Young for writing a foreword to this book to put it in a larger context.

The fact that this work is even being published at all is due to the efforts and encouragement of two people: my wife, Lulu (Elizabeth) Brotherton, and my lamented friend, David M. Eisenberg. It is to them and my revered teacher, Rudolph Mach, that I dedicate this slightly revised version of my dissertation.

Queens, NY, USA
May 29, 2020

Larry Benjamin Miller

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To all of the above and to my teachers in Princeton and Tübingen (Dickson, Gaube, Halm, Hamori, Marks, Mottahedeh, Ullmann, and Voigt), I wish to express my gratitude.

My revered teacher, Rudolf Mach, suggested to me that I undertake a study of *al-Risāla al-Samarqandīya fī ādāb al-baḥth* and its commentaries in conjunction with Aristotle's *Topics*. His untimely death deprived me of a learned adviser and dear friend.

I am therefore extremely grateful to Professor Josef van Ess who kindly consented to fill in this great void by agreeing to advise this dissertation and to Professor Andras Hamori for taking on the role of my advisor at Princeton University.

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