



Self and Other in Islamic Tradition, The Possibility of a Dialogical Engagement

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Abstract: In the present paper, “Self” and “other” and their relation have been questioned. 7 types of political confrontation between self and other and, in a wider scope, between “our” culture and “their” culture are perceivable: conquest, conversion, assimilation and acculturation, partial assimilation: cultural borrowing, liberalism, conflict, and dialogical engagement. The first six were dominant in political history of humankind. But the last type is the only appreciated one that provides the path of development and progress in the shadow of peace and security . Findings of this article show that although the dialogical engagement is not the dominant type, there are some prominent and obvious cases in the Islamic heritage. Scientific contestation of Imam Sadeq and Imam Reza (PBUT), the believers of other religions and even atheists as well as the encounter of Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Birūnī and Indians in his everlasting book, *India* are examples of dialogical engagement.

Keywords: Self and Other, Otherness, Islamic Tradition, Islamic Heritage, Dialogue, Post-colonialism.

Introduction

Who and what is human? One can claim that collective existence of humans is mostly under the influence of their definition of themselves. Titles like the “erect animal”, the “speaking animal”, “the tool-making creature” and such as these point out to human relations from different points of view. One of the aspects of these human relations is the relation with others. When these “others” have different identities, they create a border between themselves; based on the self and other approaches to this border, the human relations spectrum will encompass a wide range from peace to conflict. Based on this, self, other and their relations, though relatively a new concept, have been present in various domains of human knowledge and thought. From this point of view, it can be said that the origin of most human disputes in history is due to misunderstandings about self and other. Self and other and the relations between them determine the kind of living and its quality and quantity. The relation of self and other is multidisciplinary in nature and has political, economic, social and cultural consequences.

Reviewing the historical trend of such a relation between these two shows that there has been a twofold procedure regarding this relationship. There were some attempts to depict a peaceful and conciliatory relation based on cultural relations between self and other, and sometimes there were great actions by “self” to disrespect “other” and gain dominance over the other. In this regard, the “self” committed aggressive anti-moral and anti-human actions.

In an article entitled “The Other and Ourselves: Is Multiculturalism Inherently Relativist?” Charles Taylor (2002) said: “Understanding “the other” will pose the 21st century's greatest social challenge. The days are over when “Westerners” could consider their experience and culture as the norm and other cultures merely as earlier stages in the West's development. Nowadays, most of the West senses the arrogant presumption at the heart of that old belief.” Taylor, then, reviews the following question: “Does attending differences and accepting them demand relativism? And naturally his reply to this question is negative: “But it is wrong to believe that accepting cultural differences requires abandoning allegiance to truth.”

Taylor's brief article ends with this sentence: "Avoiding distortion requires acknowledging that our way of being is not uniquely "natural," that it merely represents one among many possible forms." and as it starts with a confession it ends with a confession too: "Our task is to acknowledge the humanity of these "other" ways while still living our own. (Taylor, 2002)

Today, this wrong idea has emerged in some academic environments that modern views are based on respecting the other and dialogue and traditional views are based on conflict and dispute with the other and war against the other. We tend to challenge this wrong idea.

Not all modern and Western views emphasize respecting the other and not all traditional and Eastern views disrespect others and dialogue. The emergence and growth of extremism in form of Al-Qaeda, Da'esh (ISIS) and other similar groups has extended the idea that Islam is associated only with sword, terror, war and aggression.

As much as we cannot ignore the aggressive views of some groups like Al-Qaeda and Da'esh (ISIS), we cannot ignore the dialogical engagement views of Muslim scientists either.

1. Views toward the Other in the West

Based on democracy which is the heritage of Ancient Greece (and of course there were similar democratic cities in Sumer Civilization in Mesopotamia) Western modern civilization has changed the path of human history and succeeded in internalizing dialogue, negotiation and democratic change of power in human societies; respecting this great achievement, we shall not ignore its violations either; the colonization of non-western countries and having a pejorative view towards them are among these violations. These cases are so numerous that Emmanuel Lévinas, the famous western philosopher said:

The characteristic of western philosophy was that it could not think about "the other" from the aspect of its own otherness. (Davis, 68, 2007).

The modern western thought starts with Rene Descartes. Rene Descartes considered consciousness as the beginning of any kind of cognition. In his view, the "other" is reduced to an epistemological self.

Kant pursued the same path and considered the other(s) as objects that mind and "self" seek to know. However, he created a gap between object and subject that turned into a philosophical problem. All philosophers after Kant attempted to resolve this gap between object and subject.

Husserl's phenomenology tried to deal with this problem using what he named "intentionality". Phenomena can be purely and accurately reviewed only when we understand that every knowledge is a knowledge of something. One of the basic questions in phenomenology is how does "other" exist for me? From Husserl's view, the first determination of the other is only an objective determination. The body of the other is understood as an object. The distinction between body here and that body there finally results in the distinction between these two subjects. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in replying to this question that it is this world that makes possible my relation with the other. I enter into this relation due to similarities between my body and the other's body. I and the other share a similar body. (Kokab, 2004: 65).

In this way, the simple relation of self and the other in Cartesian thought becomes a complex relation of these two in Merleau-Ponty's thought in which the relation of self and other will be possible via the relation of bio-body and world thanks to the ideas of Heidegger and Husserl. However, this relation is retrogressive and reflects self in other and other in self and these two on each other. (Qorbani, 2004, 9-95)

The complexity of the relation of self and other and ignoring the other in theoretical aspect is extended to the practical aspect too and gains a political and social dimension. While philosophers were trying to understand how "other" exists for them, the relation with the "other" was intermixed with power in international politics. In fact, what makes the relation of self and other a political issue is the problem of "power" and "dominance" in this relation. Power and dominance affect this relation in cultural, international and civilizational domains.

Many countries have experienced "colonization" in socio-political areas. These countries have encountered power and dominance. "Dominance refers to a special method of implementing power. A method of acting on persons or groups completely against

their wishes or desires." (Miller, 2003:10) And this is a phenomenon which was enforced in colonized countries for many years.

However, power acts against dominance and in a more thoughtful manner and tries to encircle "person" with a series of personal aims and ambitions. From this viewpoint, power is more internal and has a better knowledge of person. Power does not act from a far distance but from inside the person and by himself/herself. Power is a method of intervening with social terms and in this matter, creating a knowledge of object and the method of acting on it is crucial. (Miller, 2003:10)

Studies of Edward Said show the social and political representation of over dominance over them. The most famous and effective work of Edward Said is "Orientalism". Said focused on the history of colonial era and scientific processes behind it and drew the hidden ideological prerequisites behind this history by means of the idea of the relation of knowledge and power from great French philosopher Michel Foucault. (Huggan, 2005:124) In his view, an academic subject called Orientalism emerged regarding the power relations of East and West (Corr, 2008: 50). The basis of what Said intends to explain intention can be summarized as follows: Many western people considered Eastern World with all its varieties only a dark and disorganized "other" against Organized and Advanced West. (Wood, 2006: 199). The studies of Edward Said and other Postcolonial thinkers such as Fanon (2004), Homi K. Bhabha (2005), and Gandhi (1998) have had great effects on the west's awareness regarding its wrong relation with the other. The crucial question of Spivac is still resonating: "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivac: 1988)

Distancing from the other and converting our dominated relation over them is a gradual and historical process. In Dalmayer's words, "self" distanced from "other selves" in a multi-centurial historical period. The result of this process was hiding concepts like unanimity. In his view, there are several effective factors in this process: Christianity entered a new orientation, i.e. focusing on the relation of Human and God, for interpersonal human relations. Modern Philosophy by Descartes established a recognizer "self" as internal certitude of self and separated it from the outer world, which

involves nature and other selves. Liberal theorists from Habermas to utilitarian theorists considered personal interest as the axle and motivator in Politics and Economics, though sometimes there were some references to inter-human aspects, sympathy and fairness. (Manuchehri, 2003: 195) Therefore, contrary to the simplistic ideas and views, there is an orientalist view behind western democratic and negotiation-based approaches which sets the way for western dominance over East.

2. The Forms of Cross-Cultural Encounter

Dallmayr in his book entitled *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* refers to the forms of Cross-Cultural encounter. He points to seven forms: conquest, conversion, assimilation and acculturation, partial assimilation: cultural borrowing, liberalism, conflict, and dialogical engagement. (Dallmayr 1996, 1-38)

The question is whether or not there are any similar examples of these seven forms of cross-cultural encounter in the Islamic tradition?

Conquest meaning annexation of foreign territories and subjugation of people through invasion, has long been practiced throughout history. It has a history in Islamic civilization as well. Islam, which emerged among the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula, invaded the great empires of Iran and Rome within a short period of time and also annexed to its own territory North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

Conversion can be one of the outcomes of conquest. Conquest leads to subjugation of foreign nations. But sometimes, conquest moves further and leads to mandatory cultural assimilation. In this case, conquest results in conversion. Muslim Arabs managed to impose their religion and language on a vast area of the Middle East and North Africa. All of the Arab-speaking countries, except for Saudi Arabia, have adopted Arabic language through this process. Among Arabs' early conquests, Iran was the only country that was invaded but preserved its own language. Although modern Persian language is written using Arabic alphabet, yet its grammar and a considerable portion of its vocabulary have been preserved.

Assimilation and acculturation depend on cultural dominance in domestic settings, which is not necessarily achieved through

conquest, but rather through development of different cultural models or various lifestyles. In the contemporary world, nationalism is an example of assimilation. Such examples could be found in introduction and spread of Islam in Southeastern Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. In these countries, Islam entered the domestic culture through merchants and then was promoted with the support of the merchants and some of the local rulers.

Partial assimilation or cultural borrowing occurs in cases in which the two cultures are unequal and comparable. In these cases, one culture is not integrated into another. However, a kind of cultural give and take takes place. Apart from the wars which are often highlighted, the encounter between the Muslim east and Christian west has involved cultural borrowing. The impact of great Muslim thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes on great Christian thinkers such as Saint Thomas Aquinas is an example of such encounters.

Liberalism, which stresses overlapping of cultures, is basically the western form of encounter and a perfect example of this kind of encounter can hardly be found in the eastern tradition. However, some periods in Islamic history loosely fit this form of encounter. The golden era of Islamic civilization during the third and fourth centuries H.Q. and especially during the reign of the Buyid dynasty, is an example of this kind of encounter. Some western orientalists have referred to this period as the Islamic renaissance -although there is no room here for a more detailed study of this issue.

Conflict, which is unfortunately a common form of cross-cultural encounter, is also found in the Islamic tradition; whether the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims or those between different Muslim sects in which through the process of excommunication (takfir), a Muslim brother is turned into the hostile 'other'.

In Dallmayr's categorization, the last form of encounter, which in his opinion, is the most honest and admirable form of encounter, is dialogical engagement. The main issue in this article is whether this form of encounter, like liberalism, is specific to western traditions or that its successful examples can be found in the Islamic tradition.

3. Historical samples of dialogical engagement in Islamic Tradition

In the previous section, seven forms of encounter with the other in the Islamic civilization were studied. There is little doubt regarding the presence of five form of encounters in the Islamic tradition, but the presence of the liberal and dialogical encounters in the Islamic tradition is controversial. This article seeks to illustrate historical examples that can confirm the presence of dialogical tradition. The dialogical tradition has had a remarkable role among most of the Muslim scholars and philosophers. Among these scholars, Al-Biruni is distinguished from others.

3.1. Aliboron or Al-Biruni or Alberuni

Abū al-Rehān Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī, known as Al-Biruni is a famous name in the history of Islamic and Global Civilization. His name is usually associated with "Ostad (Master)" and his students called him "Chief Master" and "Imam Master". (Zabih Allah Safa, *Yadnameh*, 1974: 2) Al-Biruni is one of the greatest Islamic scientists. (Bazorth in Ajand, 2001: 54) Zachau, the translator of Al-Biruni's books into English, considered him "the greatest scientist the history had ever seen" and then to avoid being accused of flattery, he said, "this idea about him is the result of exact awareness of all his works." (Zachau in: Biruni, 1910) In English literature, he is known as Al-Biruni or Alberuni.

Henry Corbin considered him one of the greatest scientists and appreciated his works in history, comparative religion, logging, math, and astronomy. (Corbin, 1984: 209). Katrina Stenou finished her book, *The Image of Other* book by pointing out that Abū al-Rehān Al-Biruni "a Muslim historian created the bases of comparative and forbearance studies". *Alberuni's India (Malelhend)* is the base of forbearance in comparative studies. (Stenou, 2004)

Abū al-Rehān Al-Biruni begins the book *India (Malelhend)* which is devoted to describing the Indian traditions, customs and sciences by describing their differences from us; according to his view, what distinguishes an Indian from an Iranian is the difference in language, religion and social norms.

It could be concluded that Al-Biruni's standards were general and cultural ones. His view is against the views which consider inherent factors like water, weather and soil as the source of differences

among us and others, or against the views of religious clerics who consider the Curse of God as the source of differences. Al-Biruni considered mainly cultural factors like language, religion, traditions and customs as the source of differences.

Nevertheless, the significant point is that Al-Biruni's view toward the other is one of welcoming and reception. Welcoming the other has an important role in a peaceful relation between self and the other. (Davis, 2007: 277) One of the most significant representations and determinations of reception is being audible. Based on this, Al-Biruni who was a master in many sciences did not fear to be a student of Indian science and knowledge and even confessed this at several points in his work. (Al-Biruni, 1958: 117, 119, 121, 123). His cultural view toward Indian people resulted in never considering himself as superior and he did not abuse his knowledge to spread the power of Mahmoud Qaznavi King who entered India accompanied by Al-Biruni. Al-Biruni admiringly criticized Mahmoud Qaznavi King in a clear judgement.

Throughout the book, *Malelhend*, we never encounter a chapter or passage where the dominance of Sultan Mahmoud Qaznavi and his successors is directly promoted. There is neither any passage nor suggestion in the book advising Qaznavi kings what to do in order to expand their power in this region. Al-Biruni's deep knowledge and understanding of India was never used to serve power and dominance.

In *India (Malelhend)*, Indians and Al-Biruni talked in an equal level; both talked and listened. One proposed whatever he had and his proposal is always criticized, but this criticism is not based on colonizer cultural criteria.

The nature of Al-Biruni and Indian relation is not based on greed and "there is no aim in the relation of "you" and "I", except that there is no greed or expectation in this relation." Some parts of the nature and essence of this relation is the result of cultural view of Al-Biruni toward the other.

The most important feature of cultural definition of the other is the voluntary nature of these parameters. Language, religion, traditions and customs are human parameters that are formed and

established by humans and they can further change or modify them; therefore, the view toward the other will unintentionally have human parameters too, but the definition of other will result in the superiority of one over the other by means of coercive and non-human parameters and will result in a discourse which is called Orientalism by Edward Said.

One of the most significant features of Al-Biruni's view toward the other is focusing on the framework of their norms and standards and not ours. Al-Biruni's critique of India is completely contextual. It means that he used internal Indian norms and standards along with external norms and criteria for analyzing and criticizing India.

Abū al-Rehān Al-Biruni viewed Indian traditions and customs from different viewpoints. He compared these traditions and customs with behavioral and practical methods of Iranians, Arabs, and Greeks and religious and intellectual doctrines; he refused to criticize and blame only based on religious doctrines or Iranian views. He avoided egocentrism in his judgements. His countless confessions to show that he cannot understand some sciences or traditions and customs convinces the reader that he "does not think instead of the other."

3.2. Discourses of religious leaders

Another successful and determining sample of this kind can be found in the scientific discourses of religious leaders and the sons of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (Imams) with followers of other religions.

Debate and discourse as one of the most formal methods of discussion and argument were customary from ancient times. There are many discourses in the lives of Imams (PBUH) particularly Ja'far ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq - Imam Sadeq (PBUH) - and 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā - Imam Reza- (PBUH) that shows the significance of discourse, but these holy men never violated moral rules in their debates. They focused on patience and forbearance, avoided anger and aggression and respected others in all their debates. These discourses show that official recognition of competitor with patience and forbearance, loyalty, truth and avoiding disrespect, contempt and telling lies is a desirable conversation.

The most famous book which collected some series of these negotiations is *Ehtejaj* by Tabarsi. This book is composed in 6th

Century Hegira (12th Anno Domini century) by Abu Mansour Sheikh Ahman ibn Ali ibn Abutaleb Tabarsi, one the famous innovators and a great Muslim scientist. This book collected questions and discourses of Holy Prophet of Islam and Shia Imams. These discourses are important since they would challenge the general belief that Islam is dominated by sword, force and war and defend the possibility of dialogical engagement in the tradition of Holy saints.

3.3. The principles governing Imam Reza's debates

At the time of Imam Reza (PBUH), as a result of new opportunities, various, or even contradictory, underlying social discourses had the chance to demonstrate their conflicts publicly. This period coincided with the peak of Islamic theology. Expansion of Islamic territories, the movement for translation and promotion of Greek, Egyptian, Iranian, Roman, and Indian works, Ma'mun's tolerance, power struggles at the top of the ruling pyramid, provided the context for emergence and development of different ideas and beliefs in the public sphere. Much of Imam Reza's scientific endeavor consisted of dialogues with the advocates of different beliefs and religions. (Mirahmadi, 2016) Imam Reza (PBUH) discussed various topics including Monotheism and Imamate with different people such as the representative of the Jews, Ras al-Jalut, the representative of the Christians, Catholicos, the representative of the Zoroastrians, Herbez Akber, the representative of the Sabians, Emran the Sabian, the representative of the Zindiqs and materialists, followers of Islamic sects who held specific beliefs like Suleiman Marvzi, Abuqorah, Ali bin Mohammad bin Jahm, Ma'mun, Ibn Sakit and others who are unknown. (Rouhi, 2017: 8)

Here we further study the principles governing Imam Reza's debates:

1. Listening to what the other side has to say: the difference between a dialogue and a monologue is that a dialogue has two sides. The first and most important prerequisite for a dialogue is listening to the other side. Throughout the debates, Imam Reza always listened to the other party, even if he repeated something that, in Imam's view, was wrong. He allowed the other party to ask his questions and in answering those

questions he was reticent and avoided using long and repetitive sentences. (Zare, 2016: 19)

2. Refraining from entering marginal and insignificant discussions: he prohibited his companions and followers from entering marginal, insignificant, and troublesome discussions; discussions that distract one from the main subject and cause boredom and resentment. (Froutan, 2014)
3. Avoiding engaging in a dialogue with the intention of persecution and harassment: Imam Reza's purpose in dialogues and debates was not teasing or persecuting the other party. His grandfather, Imam Sadeq (PBUH) said, "Ask in order to understand not to bother others." (Kalini, 1429 HQ, volume 1: 626) Thus, asking questions in order to find faults with the other person, or to prove that he is illiterate, or to defame him is not permitted. The objective should be learning or teaching.
4. Complying with the principles accepted by both parties: one of the main characteristics of Imam Reza's dialogues was his emphasis on the principles accepted by all the Islamic sects and even all the religions. Imam Reza (PBUH) referred to the holy book of the Christians in his debate with them. In this debate, the Christian leader told Imam Reza: "How do I debate with a person who believes in a holy book and prophet that I do not believe in?" Imam Reza replied: "Christian! Shall we debate based on the Bible?" And this proposal was accepted by the Christian leader. (Ibn Babawayh, 1415 HQ: 420) Imam Reza has been quoted saying, "I debate with Christians using the Bible, with Jews using Torah, with Sabians using the principles of their own religion, with Zoroastrians using Avesta, and with Romans using their own language. (Mosalaeipour, 2013: 97) Also, Imam Reza, while defending or explaining, always followed rational principles and rules; to the extent that rationality as a means of understanding general issues and laws and thinking and argumentation as a means of rational cognition were the most widely used tools in Imam Reza's epistemology. (Zare, 2016: 21) In addition, Imam Hadi (PBUH) in a letter answering the questions raised by the people of

Ahvaz regarding the issue of determinism and free will, referred to the principles accepted by all the Islamic sects. (Ibn Sho'ba Harani, 1404 HQ: 458)

5. Good manners and congeniality during dialogues and avoiding irritability and anger: one of the factors affecting a successful dialogue is observing good manners during the conversation, avoiding irritability, and keeping calm. Regarding Imam Reza's method of dialogue, it has been mentioned that he revered the other side of the conversation and referred to him respectfully. (Mosalaeipour, 2013: 95) Imam Reza treated religious leaders in a way that clearly demonstrated that he is not self-centered or seeking to prove his own logic in any way possible. Imam Reza always avoided fallacy or deviating the discussion, highlighting the weaknesses of the other side, insulting and mocking a person and his beliefs, even if the other side of the debate used fallacy and went to extremes to defeat him. Imam Reza's debate with the Christian leader, Catholicos, is an example. He took advantage of any opportunity to criticize Imam Reza's personality and humiliate him, but Imam Reza did not retaliate in the same manner. (Zare, 2016: 20)
6. Considering the qualifications and level of the other side in a debate: assessing and evaluating the other party, that is, knowing the recipient of the message, is one of the most important and decisive elements in a conversation. Speaking in accordance with the level of understanding of the audience is so important that Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) argued that God had ordered all the Divine prophets to observe it. By studying the debates and discussions in which Imam Sadeq and Imam Reza (PBHT) engaged, it becomes clear that Imam Reza considered their audience in all their teachings. He was well aware of that understating religious concepts occurs at different levels and each person, depending on his capacity and characteristics, partially comprehends these concepts. Since all the audience members did not have the same capacity, Imam Reza provided the appropriate content based on their capacity

and addressed each one in a specific way. If the other side of the conversation was a layman, he tried to use a simple language, speak with him by employing tangible expressions, and avoid complicated discussions. Therefore, while speaking to ordinary people, Imam Reza primarily used simple forms such as parables, simple questions or the personal experience of those people. On the other hand, if the other side of the debate was a professional expert with great intellectual ability, he used specialized jargons, engaged in sophisticated intellectual discussions, and using certain methods and techniques, steered the discussion in the desired direction.

7. Ensuring freedom of speech: in many cases, Imam Reza asked the other side of the debate to express his views without any fear or worry. This demonstrates his liberal spirit in the sociopolitical sphere. In some cases Imam Reza stated: "People! Is anyone among you against Islam? If he wants to, he may ask his questions without fear or trepidation." (Mirahmadi, 2016: 82)

Al-Biruni, as the most distinguished Muslim scholar in the field of dialogue, and Imam Sadeq and Imam Reza, as the descendants of Prophet Muhammad and religious leaders of the Shiite sect respected by other Islamic sects, have been studied as examples of dialogical encounter with non-Muslims. Now, based on historical evidence, it could be stated that dialogical encounter has also been considered in Islamic tradition. As Dallmayr (1996) emphasizes, future prospects in international cross-cultural relations will be mainly based on this form of encounter. So long as various cultures do not want to be in contact with one another, the prospect will remain dark. In other words, so long as these cultures do not begin to learn from each other while preserving their traditional differences, the situation will not change. In our global village, which grows smaller day by day, what is needed above all is cross-cultural dialogue.

Conclusion

One does not need to think deeply in order to realize the concerns regarding the future of the world and intensification of conflicts, especially among different cultures and religions. This article seeks to

examine the prejudice that dialogue is specific to the western intellectual heritage and conflict is the nature of the eastern intellectual heritage, especially Islam.

Unfortunately, there is prevailed prevailing duality in academic areas that modern and Western attitudes are based on respecting the other and dialogue, and on the contrary, traditional and Eastern attitudes are based on conflict and dispute with the other and war against the other. We tend to challenge this wrong duality.

Not all modern and Western views emphasize respecting “the other” and not all traditional and Eastern views disrespect “the other” and deny dialogue. Colonialism is an example against the first claim and Edward Said in his famous book, *Orientalism*, illustrated the deep inequality that is hidden in the relationship of self and the other in west.

The emergence and growth of extremism in form of Al-Qaeda, Da'esh (ISIS) and other similar groups has extended the second claim and made some believe that Islam is associated only with sword, terror, war and aggression.

As much as we cannot ignore the aggressive views of some groups like Al-Qaeda and Da'esh (ISIS), we cannot ignore the dialogical engagement views of Muslim heritage either. In this article, we chose an Iranian scholar as a good example of a conversational encounter and presented the discourses of the offsprings of the prophet Mohammad (PBUH) as an instance for equality in the engagement with the other in the Islamic tradition.

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