

# Towards Intercultural Dialogue, Synthesis, and Pluralism: Revisiting Baghdad's House of Wisdom

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*ABSTRACT: This study challenges present-day dualisms and divisions, which are reflected in socio-political and intercultural dialogue. The aim of this study is to connect the philosophical discourse of the ninth-century House of Wisdom to modern conceptions of Islam by extending the dialogical rhetoric of that discourse. This study revisits the House of Wisdom, first, to invoke an inclusive, intercultural Islamic tradition that negates the circumscription of Islam by radical views. Second, it reintroduces the liberal arts as pedagogical tools that are central to the Islamic wisdom tradition. Third, it explores the notions of Aql and Fitrah and how they prescribe Hikmah.*

*RÉSUMÉ : Cette étude remet en cause les dualismes et divisions actuels qui se reflètent dans le dialogue socio-politique et interculturel. Le projet vise à établir un lien entre le discours philosophique de la Maison de la Sagesse du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle et les conceptions modernes de l'islam en étendant la rhétorique dialogique dudit discours. Le projet en question a également pour but de réexaminer la Maison de la Sagesse. Ce processus consiste d'abord à invoquer une tradition islamique inclusive et interculturelle qui contrecarre la vision limitée d'un islam radical. Puis, il consiste à réintroduire les arts libéraux comme outils pédagogiques au cœur de la tradition islamique de la sagesse, et finalement, à explorer les principes du Aql et de la Fitrah ainsi que la façon dont ils prescrivent la Hikmah.*

**Keywords:** intercultural dialogue, wisdom tradition, interfaith, Islamic philosophy, radicalization

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Prince Feisal: But you know, Lieutenant, in the Arab city of Cordoba were two miles of public lighting in the streets when London was a village?

T.E. Lawrence: Yes, you were great.

Prince Feisal: Nine centuries ago.

T.E. Lawrence: Time to be great again, my lord.

*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

## Introduction

The prospect of fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogue has increasingly become a challenge in a world in which the relations between Islam and the West have been defined by irreconcilable religious and cultural differences. Revisiting counter-narratives that seek to dismantle polarized political world-views endorses a move towards intercultural awareness. Baghdad's ancient House of Wisdom reflects critical and learning practices that embraced intercultural and interdisciplinary pursuits. In detailing the practices within the House of Wisdom, and in drawing attention to the enormous contributions of Islam to Western culture, this study challenges currently pervasive dualisms and divisions, readily reflected in present-day socio-political discourses, and contributes to recent scholarship in critical pedagogy, the philosophy of education, and intercultural/cross-cultural dialogue. The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which intercultural dialogue is compellingly informed by grammar, rhetoric, and logic to encourage philosophical investigation, or 'Aql,' in contrast to the copious transmission of knowledge, defined as 'Naql.' To connect the philosophical discourse of the ninth-century House of Wisdom to modern ways of learning, we need to extend its dialogical and cultural narrative and genuinely examine the concept of wisdom or 'Hikmah.'

As Claudia Eppert et al.<sup>1</sup> emphasize, the current global situation calls upon us to engage in more interdisciplinary, intercultural, and interfaith dialogue, and to contemplate possibilities for solidarity-in-difference in ways that will overturn grammars of violence and violation and facilitate possibilities for social and environmental transformation. As has increasingly been recognized, ancient and contemporary wisdom traditions compellingly challenge modernity and neoliberal discourses, and illuminate paths toward dialogue and solidarity.<sup>2</sup> The Crusades brought significant European attention to the intellectual, economic, and cultural breadth, wealth, and scope of Islamic life,<sup>3</sup> and signalled the beginning of important cultural, commercial, and linguistic exchanges. European intellectuals were alerted to the marked contrast between their

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<sup>1</sup> Eppert et al., "Intercultural Philosophy."

<sup>2</sup> See Smith, *Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom*; Bai et al., "Towards Intercultural Philosophy;" Eppert et al., "Intercultural Philosophy and the Nondual Wisdom."

<sup>3</sup> See Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*; Lyons, *Western Eyes*.

limited texts and the vast research libraries and accumulation of knowledge in Arab cities. One of these libraries was the House of Wisdom, located in cosmopolitan Baghdad, also known as the ‘City of Peace.’ A centre for learning and scholarship, the House of Wisdom was sponsored by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma’mun (Harun Al-Rashid’s son), who was “destined to become the greatest patron of science ... and the person responsible for initiating the world’s most impressive period of scholarship and learning since ancient Greece.”<sup>4</sup> Social theorist Jonathan Lyons draws attention to how the royal library housed Greek, Hindu, and Persian philosophy, mathematics, and science, and was focused on study and translation, as an initial step. Lyons maintains that Arab scholars were not mere caretakers of knowledge, but were heavily immersed in translation, testing, and reformulating scholarship, before passing it onto Western culture; although some tension did exist between science and religion, there was no real conflict between them within the Muslim community as there often seemed to be within Western traditions that maintained divisions between them.

In sum, this study asks these questions: what wisdom might the ‘House of Wisdom’ bring to furthering our understanding of education as a transformative praxis to support peace and intercultural and cosmopolitan dialogue? Since ‘Bayt El-Hikmah,’ often translated as ‘The House of Wisdom,’ upholds wisdom, what is the meaning of ‘Hikmah’ in Islam, and how does it inform education? In what ways can revisiting the House of Wisdom further intercultural dialogues? Essentially, this study revisits the House of Wisdom in order, first, to invoke an inclusive, intercultural Islamic tradition that negates the circumscription of Islam by radical views. Second, it reintroduces the liberal arts as intellectual and pedagogical tools that are central to the Islamic wisdom tradition and not as an exclusive Western product. Third, it explores the notions of ‘Aql’ and ‘Fitrah’ in order to better conceptualize ‘Hikmah.’

### **The House of Wisdom: Created to ‘Know Each Other’**

The House of Wisdom was a research and translation institution that, for about 500 years, attracted scholars and collected books from all over the world. During this time, Islamic civilization embraced technological developments such as the production of paper from China, and fostered an intellectual climate defined by the production of book-binding and a melting-pot academic enterprise that gave birth to the House of Wisdom. The institution welcomed scholars regardless of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, and became a learning centre in which wisdom traditions merged and interacted.

Founded by Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid (766-809 AD) and his son Al-Ma’mun (813-833 AD), the House of Wisdom was not only a large library in which books and manuscripts were preserved and translated, but an arena in

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<sup>4</sup> Al-Kalili, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 4.

which scholars gathered for discussion, debate, and conversation. It represented the convergence of the Islamic quest for knowledge, the Hellenistic philosophical tradition, and many other cultures, ideas, and innovations.<sup>5</sup> Already fabled as a city of wealth and envied for the company it kept, Baghdad was enriched by an intellectual society of scholars who travelled to the House of Wisdom in pursuit of answers to their queries and knowledge of modern innovations. From this convivial and intellectual landscape arose a scholarly fervor for genuine research that did not limit itself to sheer mimicry of ancient wisdom and knowledge.

What the House of Wisdom offers today is that eclectic spirit of inquiry that searches for intercultural wisdom. The House of Wisdom promotes “philosophy as cultural work” whose aim is “to attend to the problematic aspects of a culture or cultures and introduce and implement alternate ways of negotiating reality, then philosophy’s primary activity would be to search for worldviews and values that promise or have been shown to be efficacious in responding to the problems that a culture is experiencing.”<sup>6</sup> As he had welcomed thinkers of different ethnic backgrounds and intellectual dispositions to his court, Al-Ma’mun achieved with the House of Wisdom a promotion of “philosophy as cultural work”:

This created a melting pot for intellectual traditions that had been forcibly kept apart for centuries by political divisions: Hellenistic learning that evolved in Greece and, later, Alexandria, on the one hand, and Sumerian, Persian, and Indian Wisdom, on the other. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, the star-worshipping Sabaeans, and assorted other pagans were all able to exchange ideas and teachings.<sup>7</sup>

The House of Wisdom, therefore, offers a zone of open contact in which meaning and matter, experience and unworldliness, and Islam and diaspora coexist in flux, and are not seen as perpetually in opposition, as radical militant factions such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) would have it.

In “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grey Zone,” a 2015 article from their online magazine ‘Dabiq,’ ISIL called for the elimination of the “grey zone” in which Muslims live in non-Muslim communities.<sup>8</sup> This call entails a form of ‘*hegira*’ (‘migration’), which ISIL uses as a method of recruiting future loyalists. By propagating *hegira* as the only alternative for Muslims living in Western countries, ISIL negates one of the main foundations of Islam, which is the possibility of coexisting in a pluralistic social fabric. The anti-cultural rhetoric of ISIL’s English journal ‘Dabiq’ propagates the discourse of

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Kalili, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Bai et al., “Towards Intercultural Philosophy,” p. 638.

<sup>7</sup> Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy.”

non-acceptance in order to mobilize both Western and Muslim populations into a world-model that is hostile to multi-cultural and multi-religious ideals. The Islamic empire, which stretched from India to Spain, established a new trading complex that facilitated the spread of ideas over vast and strange lands, and “helped rescue the Christian world from ignorance and made possible the very idea of the West.”<sup>9</sup> However, in more recent years, Islamic tradition has been depicted in opposition to Western ways, has often been accused of holding back Western achievements, and has frequently been dismissed as a social oddity that has nothing to offer contemporary life and hinders the assimilation process for newcomers.

For example, in an interview for Fox News, Sean Hannity asked Donald Trump to elaborate on Muslims seeking freedom and bringing their cultural traditions to America. In response to this inquiry, Trump asserted that, in his opinion, assimilation is unachievable: “Assimilation has been very hard. It’s almost—I won’t say non-existent, but it gets to be pretty close. And I’m talking about second and third generation. They come—they don’t—for some reason, there’s no real assimilation.”<sup>10</sup> Trump’s statement reinforces the assumption that Islam is incompatible with modern ways. Moreover, Western theorists such as Francis Fukuyama,<sup>11</sup> Felipe Fernandez Armesto,<sup>12</sup> and Samuel P. Huntington<sup>13</sup> have expressed concerns about the incompatibility of Islam with a contemporary world defined by global coexistence. In fact, in “What ISIS Really Wants,” Graeme Wood<sup>14</sup> argues that what ISIS is doing is not an anomaly, but actually an intrinsic part of the Islamic tradition. Similarly, in *It IS About Islam*, Glenn Beck<sup>15</sup> unfairly dismisses Islam as a vile religion that encourages terrorism and incites hatred. It is imperative, therefore, to address the interculturality and pluralistic insight of Islamic tradition, as expressed in cultural landmarks such as the House of Wisdom.

The Quran itself has offered a more compelling plan towards diversity, in which knowing each other as well as coexistence outlines a divine purpose: “O mankind! We created you from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other).”<sup>16</sup> The medieval Muslim scholar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari explains that “only on the basis of piety may we distinguish between human beings, not on the basis of lineage and descent.”<sup>17</sup> With the Quranic

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<sup>9</sup> Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Jacobson, “Donald Trump Wrong.”

<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

<sup>12</sup> Fernandez Armesto, *Millennium*.

<sup>13</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants.”

<sup>15</sup> Beck, *It IS About Islam*.

<sup>16</sup> Quran 49:13.

<sup>17</sup> Afsaruddin, “Finding Common Ground.”

verse in mind, Aryn B. Sajoo argues, “Pluralism in culture and identity is cast here not as a passive reality, but as a project: human communities are expected to ‘know each other’ as a fulfilment of the covenant with God. The expectation is explicitly aimed at all of mankind, not a particular community.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Sajoo elaborates that “this pluralist narrative of identity is at one with the outlook professed by the earliest umma: the inclusive thrust of the Constitution of Medina was premised on civic as well as religious membership, not to mention clan affinities.”<sup>19</sup> In the Islamic wisdom tradition, difference has always been an incentive and not an alienating force. Islam has often been celebrated for its intermediary impact and for its accommodation of cultural and ethnic differences: “Islam dominated the Old World, determining its global destiny. It alone, as we have said, brought together the three great cultural zones of the Old World—the Far East, Europe and Black Africa. Nothing could pass between them without its consent or tacit acquiescence. It was their intermediary.”<sup>20</sup> By adopting a liberal arts perspective, the House of Wisdom objectifies the philosophy of wisdom ‘as cultural work’ that seeks to cross paths and subsumes ‘Hikmah’ from foreign and familiar territories alike.

### **Reintroducing the Liberal Arts into Education**

In the Islamic tradition, the acquisition of knowledge is a sacred duty for every Muslim, both male and female. The first word revealed to the Prophet was ‘Iqra,’ which is Arabic for ‘Read,’ and the Prophet replied, ‘I’m not a reader.’ Because he was illiterate, the Prophet was thinking of abecedarian reading; however, the angel was referring to a different kind of reading: reading into the world with insight.<sup>21</sup> The concept of ‘Iqra’ has epistemological implications in Islam as one of the many words that are attached to the lexicon of ‘ilm,’ or ‘knowledge’: “There are 704 references in the book [Quran] to words that come from ‘ilm.’ In addition, references to knowledge such as the book, pen, ink and so on occur very often, and the text itself starts with the phrase *iqra* or ‘read/recite,’ something that involves knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> ‘Iqra,’ therefore, invokes a deeper understanding of knowledge embedded in ‘Hikmah.’ In fact, knowledge was so important that even wars took on an educational dimension: the Prophet decreed after the battle of ‘Badr’ that a literate prisoner of war could secure his or her freedom by teaching 10 Muslims to read and write. The Prophet highly encouraged his followers to learn, placing knowledge seekers in high esteem: “He who leaves his home in search of knowledge walks in the path of God.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sajoo, “Introduction,” p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Sajoo, “Introduction,” p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>21</sup> Yusuf, “How to Read a Book.”

<sup>22</sup> Groff, *Islamic Philosophy A-Z*.

<sup>23</sup> Khan, *History of Muslim Education*, pp. 2-3.

Medieval Islamic schools are divided into two levels: primary and advanced. The primary stage was called 'Kuttab,' whereas the advanced studies "were conducted in the Halka systems before the establishment of Madrasa systems. Subjects studied included philology, grammar, syntax, rhetoric, literature, reading and recitation, hadith, jurisprudence, Islamic law, theology, [and] logic,"<sup>24</sup> among other subjects. This interest in the liberal arts, the trivium of logic, rhetoric, and grammar, is a part of the forgotten Islamic/Arab tradition that is now, regrettably, being perpetuated as the exclusive property of the Western intellectual repertoire.

The so-called 'Western universities' in the Arab world and Gulf States have experienced success over the past three decades. These are either private universities that have appropriated Western names or international branch campuses of official Western universities. The presence and influence of Western universities on indigenous Arab and Muslim cultures is ambivalent and may be either favourable to or intrusive upon local identities, especially without a culturally conducive approach to liberal arts education. The American educational system and its pedagogical approach that has won respect in the Arab world is rooted in the liberal arts tradition, which has witnessed further resurgence in the United States itself: "The American reinvestment in the liberal arts and sciences is perhaps not surprising given the long history of institutions based on this concept, even of it is by no means the centrepiece of the large majority of US universities."<sup>25</sup> American education has thus been celebrated for its commitment to liberal arts with the intention to educate the learner as both a human being and as a would-be specialist.

Awareness of the importance of liberal arts education to encourage open-minded learning should be prompted among local and government-funded universities in the Muslim or Arab world, as Shafeeq Ghabra and Margreet Arnold note: "Very few universities offer degrees in fine arts, history, and the social sciences, which are subjects that teach students to think about important existential and philosophical questions, such as: Who am I? What is my responsibility to society? How does my life connect with a larger history of culture?"<sup>26</sup> Baghdad's House of Wisdom initiated a surge in liberal arts education, which extended throughout the Islamic world: "Over the course of 150 years, the Arabs translated all available Greek books of science and philosophy. Arabic replaced Greek as the universal language of scientific inquiry."<sup>27</sup> Ahmed Al-Yaqubi, a ninth-century Muslim geographer, described the inhabitants of Baghdad as educated individuals whose education was drenched in liberal arts, science, philosophy, and theology:

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<sup>24</sup> Yildirim, "Islamic Education," pp. 220-222.

<sup>25</sup> Kirby and van der Wende, "A Global Dialogue," p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ghabra and Arnold, *Studying the American Way*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 64.



No one is better educated than their scholars, better informed than their authorities in tradition, more solid in their syntax than their grammarians, more supple than their singers, more certain than their Koran readers, more expert than their physicians, more competent than their calligraphers, more clear than their logicians, more zealous than their ascetics, better jurists than their magistrates, more eloquent than their preachers.<sup>28</sup>

Notably, the Islamic interest in liberal arts arose partly out of the need to address Muslim heretics and interfaith debates. In the seventh century, Damascus witnessed Muslim-Christian controversies and debates resulting from deep interest in theological and philosophical issues. As Islam gained political dominance, Muslims granted religious minorities a 'quasi-autonomous' state: "Monotheistic religious minorities (the 'people of the book': Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians) were granted a special status as protected peoples (*dhimmi*)."<sup>29</sup> This decision allowed intercommunal dialogues because "[t]he arrangements [as the protected people of the Book] made for them under Islamic law differed from any previous relationship between conquerors and conquered, or indeed between rulers and subjects ... they were allowed to practice their own religion, manage their own private and community affairs."<sup>30</sup> It also encouraged collaborative engagements and intellectual debates on theological contentions or controversial issues such as the nature of the divine and predestination:

The Arabized Christians, the Jews, and the Manichaeans of Persia, among other inhabitants of the Muslim empire, were all highly skilled at religious polemic, with many centuries of practice behind them. The neophyte Abbasids turned to Aristotle's *Topics* for help, and soon the notion of debate and formal disputation to address religious competition was well established.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, when the Arabs captured Alexandria in 641, Greek culture was fashionable in centres in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. This "meeting-ground of Greek speculative thought and oriental and mystical traditions" captured "the imagination of Arab-Muslim philosophers,"<sup>32</sup> and in many ways, the Hellenistic philosophical tradition was first transmitted in Syriac before it was translated into Arabic. Christian clerics who translated the writings of Greek thinkers were able to continue their work, stay in their monasteries, and keep their religion after the spread of Islam, and many were even hired by Abbasid patrons to translate the Greek works into Arabic.<sup>33</sup> Centres such as "Antioch, Harran, Edessa, Quinnesrin

<sup>28</sup> Al-Yaqubi, *Le Pays*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Lyons, *The House of Wisdom*, p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World*, p. 9.



and Nisibin, where Syriac-speaking scholars” diligently translated into Syriac “theological works written in Greek and emanating from Alexandria”<sup>34</sup> and texts on Aristotelian logic such as Porphyry’s “Isagoge.” Philosophy in the Islamic world, in the long run, became a crucible that accentuated a dialogical blend of philosophical traditions. For instance, in his treatise “On the After-life,” Ibn Sina (970-1037), a preeminent Muslim philosopher and physician, explores philosophical subjects that are “similar to Buddhist ideas” presenting “differing opinions on the afterlife, differences in opinions not only among Muslims, but among many religions. He mentions ideas of the Manicheans, the Christians, and the Zoroastrians (Magians).”<sup>35</sup> Ibn Sina, also known by the Latinized name ‘Avicenna,’ successfully brought this interfaith and intercultural dialogue into the early Renaissance era and well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as his philosophy influenced many “Arabophone Jewish and Christian scholars within Islam, to the extent that they were writing for their respective communities and not as members of the Islamic commonwealth, accepted most of his ideas.”<sup>36</sup>

Another case in point is Al-Farabi’s classification of the sciences, which follows the Aristotelian endorsement of the liberal arts combining “linguistics sciences (grammar, syntax, writing, reading, and poetry)” with “logic ... jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and theology [*Kalam*].”<sup>37</sup> He utilizes the trivium as a pedagogical tool to explore Arabic linguistic, literary, and theological sciences since he “does not view logic as a matter of books and documents but as a *living oral tradition* of logical specialization and expertise. From this standpoint of logic viewed as a living discipline of specialized expertise channelled through a continuous oral tradition transmitted from a master to the scholars who ‘read’ the canonical texts under his guidance.”<sup>38</sup> That living oral tradition can only be transmitted through ‘rihla.’ ‘Rihla,’ which means ‘journey’ in Arabic, is a type of travel motivated by a pursuit of knowledge that is non-regional, non-conformist, and diversifying. The traveller seeks ways to harmonize, appreciate, and find the familiar in the strange. Al-Farabi and Ibn Al-Muqaffa belonged to the ‘rihla’ tradition and produced accounts of their travels, meant not only to enrich ‘Aql’ but also, and most importantly, to nourish ‘Fitrah’ and understand human nature through encounters with different cultures.

Another traveller who exemplifies the spirit of the House of Wisdom is Al-Masudi (895-957). A native of Baghdad, Al-Masudi was an Arab historian, researcher, traveller, and geographer who was evidently influenced by Al-Mu’tazilites, and his scholastic bent and range of knowledge were products

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<sup>34</sup> Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy-Day, *Definition in Islamic Philosophy*, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> Gutas, “Ibn Sina [Avicenna].”

<sup>37</sup> Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Rescher, “Al-Farabi on Logical Tradition,” p. 131.

of the regional and Aristotelian spirit of the time.<sup>39</sup> Recognizing the multi-dimensional aspects of ‘Hikmah,’ Al-Masudi sought knowledge from Muslim and non-Muslim lands, particularly Europe and China: “In terms of breadth and depth, every medieval Christian historian was in al-Masudi’s shadow. Scholarly culture under the Abbasids resulted in much greater knowledge about world history than that of Bede or Higden.”<sup>40</sup> Because of his historical rigor, he was known as the ‘Herodotus of the Arabs,’ though his works display a more interdisciplinary dimension than his Greek counterpart. Al-Masudi refers to ‘Hikmah’ as “Prudence engendered by experience,” a process that “continues without any circumscribed or definite end.”<sup>41</sup> In that sense, ‘Hikmah’ is “assigned to the investigative-experiential method, typified in the word *bahth* (research), derived from his conception of history as the ultimate origin of all experience, the primary epistemic key.”<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Tarif Khalidi argues that, in Islamic epistemology, ‘Hikmah’ is an accumulative effort that demonstrates that there is always a future in past experiences:

*Hikma* grew into a tree of knowledge, shedding some branches and sprouting others over the course of centuries. Its most enduring branches, however, were made up of the natural sciences, i.e., mathematics, astronomy, alchemy and medicine, and of the philosophical sciences, i.e., logic, philosophy and dialectical theology. Under the epistemic umbrella of *Hikma*, the range of issues relating to historical thought reached its widest theoretical extent.<sup>43</sup>

It can be argued that ‘Hikmah’ is equivalent to philosophy, as both share a love of wisdom. Other cognate words that can be related to ‘Hikmah’ are ‘intellect,’ ‘dialectics,’ ‘illumination,’ and ‘mysticism,’<sup>44</sup> or any other technique or method for the gaining of knowledge. However, its ultimate aim should be a synthesis between ‘Aql’ and ‘Fitrah.’ In this sense, revisiting the House of Wisdom testifies to the notion that the Islamic wisdom tradition embraces an eclectic, multi-ethnic, multi-faith narrative that is rooted in liberal arts and negates the dogmatic substratum that breeds doctrinal fundamentalism.

### **The Significance of ‘Aql’ and ‘Fitrah’ in the Islamic Wisdom Tradition**

The second chapter of the Quran<sup>45</sup> includes a pedagogical discourse in which God is portrayed as a sagacious Teacher while the Angels are shown as respectful

<sup>39</sup> See Al-Mas‘udi, *The Meadows of Gold, The Abbasids*, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. 94.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Mas‘udi, *The Meadows of Gold*, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, p. 131.

<sup>43</sup> Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> Groff, *Islamic Philosophy A-Z*, p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Quran 2:30.

and yet extremely inquisitive learners. The narrative begins with God telling the Angels that He will place a ‘Khalifa’ (a Caliph), which is Arabic for ‘steward,’ ‘caretaker,’ or ‘representative,’ but often translated as ‘vice-regent,’ on Earth. Contrary to the common image of the Angels as submissive creatures who unquestioningly obey and blindly follow orders, the Angels as depicted in this passage display a healthy, sceptical attitude that sets the tone for the Quranic educational epistemology and the Islamic philosophical rhetoric of ‘Aql,’ or ‘intellect.’ The Angels dubiously reply, “Wilt thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and sheds blood?”<sup>46</sup> The interrogative mode accompanied by inductive reasoning based on prior knowledge<sup>47</sup> demonstrates an interactive learning experience.

Although God announces that He knows what they know not, the verse that immediately follows is a Socratic dialectic, in which, having “taught Adam the names of all things,”<sup>48</sup> God demonstrates the superiority of knowledge for the bewildered, uninformed Angels. The conversation takes the form of a Socratic dialectic method in the sense that God invokes prior knowledge by cross-examining His interlocutors’ logic when He asks the Angels to “Tell me the names of these if ye are right.”<sup>49</sup> Once the Angels have acknowledged their unfamiliarity with the new names, Adam is asked to reveal the meanings, thus demonstrating his knowledge and the advantage that comes from it. The Quran thereafter exalts the ‘ulu al albab’ or the grammatical variant ‘uli al albab,’ which is literally translated as ‘people of sound mind.’ In the Quranic context, ‘ulu al albab’ are people who live wisely, meditate on life, and uphold reason, as dwellers in Paradise: “in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day—there are indeed Signs for [ulu al albab] men [people] of understanding.”<sup>50</sup> The word ‘albab’ is Arabic for ‘essence.’ It is the plural of ‘lub,’ which refers to the pure core and most intrinsic part of an object, or the central, untarnished part that is often surrounded by a coarse and uneven crust. The phrase literally means the ‘possessors of the core,’ which suggests “those who have pondering minds. It normally refers to open-minded wise people who use the cosmos to understand God and their existence.”<sup>51</sup> It appears 16 times throughout the Quran, and is used to indicate people who think deeply and use their minds ‘Aql’ to reflect upon a purposeful life.

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<sup>46</sup> Quran 2:30.

<sup>47</sup> *The History of al-Tabari* notes, for example: “It has been transmitted on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās that the angels said exactly that, noticing what the jinn, who were dwellers on earth before, were doing” (Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. 1, p. 257).

<sup>48</sup> Quran 2:31.

<sup>49</sup> Quran 2:31.

<sup>50</sup> Quran 3:190.

<sup>51</sup> Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*, p. 189.

Theoretically, the notion of ‘Aql’ denotes the use of reason to address theological issues. It also suggests a departure from ‘Taqlid,’ the uncritical adherence to a particular school of thought or authoritative sources. In effect, ‘Aql’ entails the use of the practice of *ijtihad*, a form of analogical reasoning and interpretation, as opposed to ‘Taqlid’ and ‘Naql,’ which encourage imitation and intellectual subjugation. ‘Ijtihad’ is the practice of using ‘Aql’ in the sense of finding justified evidence. It is a problem-solving skill used by exegetes and Muslim scholars to approach the various problems and challenges that expanding Muslim communities faced, as opposed to the use of strict, dogmatic approaches exercised in the practice of ‘Taqlid.’ ‘Ra’y’ and ‘Qiyas,’ which respectively mean ‘independent opinion’ and ‘analogy,’ are also practices associated with ‘Aql.’ The terms ‘Aql’ and ‘Fitrah’ are not semantically oppositional or anonymous in Arabic; indeed, the Quran often praises and enjoins both faculties.

The Quranic exultation of ‘Aql’ as a rare commodity that defines ‘ulu al albab’ does not serve an elitist or rationalistic bent, nor does it indoctrinate dogmatic faith; rather, it augments conscious awareness of ‘Aql’ directed toward basic goodness and equally in accord with cognizance. In their discussion of the Shambhala Buddhist wisdom tradition, Eppert et al. maintain:

The more often human beings connect with basic goodness, through becoming mindfully aware of it, and practicing skilful resting in it, the more we come to have confidence in it. This *confidence* or *trust* is not dogmatic faith or mere intellectual assent. Rather, it is a relaxation of egoistic fixations arising from personal experience, such that attachment to conditional reference points is unnecessary.<sup>52</sup>

While recognizing significant differences between Buddhist and Islamic traditions, one may contemplate resonances. In effect, within an Islamic wisdom context, one may consider this type of “basic goodness” as an intrinsic attribute of ‘ulu al albab,’ a Quranic concept that negates dogmatism and celebrates confidence in mindful spirituality and cognizance, which is central to the Islamic conceptualization of wisdom. In effect, this notion of “basic goodness ... arising from personal experience” is an appreciation of intuition, which encourages creativity. The notion of “basic goodness” can be subsumed within the notion of basic intuition that the Arabs call ‘Fitrah,’ which is “innate or instinctive reason ... Even though that innate intelligence is insufficient to rise up to the highest stage of humanity, it turns out to be necessary for acquiring knowledge and praiseworthy qualities.”<sup>53</sup> In “The Essence of Islamic Education,” Timothy J. Winter argues that ‘Fitrah’ is an essential component of Islamic epistemology: “We cannot dismiss out of hand the experience and the practices

<sup>52</sup> Eppert et al., “Intercultural Philosophy,” p. 139.

<sup>53</sup> Abbas, “*Adab* and the Formation of Men,” p. 34.

of any civilization because the Fitrah is still there. It may be submerged, perverted, misunderstood but it cannot be entirely erased because it is part of the human composite.”<sup>54</sup> The Islamic wisdom tradition does not necessarily allocate any dissidence between ‘Fitrah’ and ‘Aql,’ as the former serves as a self-improving or reflective activity that enhances insight, which can be derived from personal or distant experiences. In fact, it disrupts the exercise of rationality, leading to the dogmatic implementation of Islamic laws. Consequently, ‘Fitrah’ that is conducive to basic goodness disrupts the location of wisdom within the presumably exclusive domain of the mind.

In *Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom*, David Geoffrey Smith compares and contrasts the Greek and Asian concepts of the mind:

The Greek concept of intellect shares much with the Asian concept of mind, in particular appreciation for the unity of mind and body, especially in the heart. For Greek sages the intellect ‘constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart’ and is variously referred to as ‘the organ of contemplation’ and ‘the eye of the heart.’<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, the Quran asserts the unity of heart and mind as the seat of intellect: “They have hearts wherewith they understand [*yaqilun*] not, eyes wherewith they see not.”<sup>56</sup> The Quran also suggests that travelling and being exposed to different cultures will enrich the wisdom of the heart: “Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may thus learn wisdom [*yaqilun*] and their ears may thus learn to hear?”<sup>57</sup> The Quran uses the word ‘*ya’qilun*,’ which is Arabic for the plural verb ‘understand,’ to refer to people who use their intellect to speculate. The verb ‘*ya’qilun*’ “belongs to the same family as the term intellect (*aql*),”<sup>58</sup> which, according to numerous philosophers and theologians, is conceptually two-sided:

This ‘intellect’ designates a faculty of knowledge one part of which is reason, the other being intuition: the intellect sees truth synthetically (by means of an intuition that grasps the true beyond all concepts) and explicates it analytically (by means of a reason that demonstrates or uses arguments). The intellect is thus a two-sided faculty, possessing both intuition and reasoning.<sup>59</sup>

Arguably, the heart becomes the hypothetical seat of the intellect and the abode of understanding because, in the Islamic wisdom tradition, mercy is what

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<sup>54</sup> Winter, “The Essence of Islamic Education, Part One.”

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom*, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Quran 7:179.

<sup>57</sup> Quran 22:46.

<sup>58</sup> Bidar, “How is Reason Used?,” p. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Bidar, “How is Reason Used?,” p. 222.

drives creation and gives meaning to life. How beneficial is the strict implementation of law, for instance, without its merciful spirit referred to as ‘justice’? God in the Quran ordains mercy upon Himself: “Your Lord has inscribed for Himself the rule of mercy.”<sup>60</sup> God also declares that the Prophet’s best attribute and the main reason why he was sent is primarily as an act of mercy for the world: “We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all creatures.”<sup>61</sup> It is in this sense that ‘falsafah’ (the Arabic word for ‘philosophy’), I argue, should be viewed as ‘Hikmat al-ilahiyyah’ (‘divine wisdom’) and only secondarily because of its role in debates over theological issues.<sup>62</sup> Ironically, only when Hikmah transcends its socio-religious peculiarities can it become divine, a synthesis of ‘Aql’ and ‘Fitrah.’ Therefore, this deep interest in ‘Aql,’ as embedded in ‘Hikmah,’ entails a retrieval of mercy, which is an overriding concern to reclaim a healthy form of Islamic education<sup>63</sup> and the praise of ‘Fitrah’ as a defining attribute of ‘Hikmah.’

Perhaps today, more than ever, Islam’s theoretical foundations have been explored with the urgent desire for an intellectual capacity within Islam that can integrate and refine its wisdom within the 21<sup>st</sup>-century intellectual landscape. There is a scholarly tendency not only to synthesize theology with contemporary sciences, but to explore Islam outside “outside the traditional confines of orthodoxy.”<sup>64</sup> The Kalam school of thought, especially the Mu’tazili philosophical endeavour, strives to find correlations between traditional Islam and rational and creative thinking. The Kalam school of thought originated from and flourished within the intellectual environment of the House of Wisdom. Kalam thinkers, or ‘Mutakallimun,’ in general, are those who are interested in conversing rationally about religious matters and theological controversies about God’s attributes, the nature of evil, and issues of law and order. Their most formidable school is the Mu’tazili, which arose in Iraq in the eighth century and gained ground rapidly in the following two centuries. The Mu’tazili attracted controversy, particularly due to their opposition to Sunni scholars who adhered to textual analysis and cautious interpretation of the Quran according to the Hadith and the etymology of the time of revelation. In effect, they followed a more descriptive ‘Naql’ style that avoids inferential endeavours that rely heavily on the human intellect ‘Aql,’<sup>65</sup> especially if it contradicts traditionalist understanding of the scripture. Kalam scholars, therefore, brought a speculative dimension to Islamic wisdom.

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<sup>60</sup> Quran 6:54.

<sup>61</sup> Quran 21:107.

<sup>62</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> See Winter, “The Essence of Islamic Education.”

<sup>64</sup> Shah, “Trajectories,” p. 431.

<sup>65</sup> See Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, p. 7.

The Caliph Al-Ma'mun himself was fascinated by dialectics, which he found to be quite well articulated and employed by the Kalam scholars. The Arabic word 'Kalam' means 'speech'; however, it does not mean casual conversation but rather a sophisticated one since the word 'Kalam' "is used in Arabic translations of the Greek philosophers as a rendering of the term *logos* in its various senses of 'words,' 'reason,' and 'argument.'"<sup>66</sup> The Mutakallimun, the plural form of the singular 'Mutakalim,' are "the great disputants within the Islamic tradition" who affirmed "the right of reason to engage in independent research ... Reason was declared to be the judge in ontological and epistemological questions,"<sup>67</sup> which stripped theologians of their monopoly over knowledge and offered free play to critical and analytical responses from individual thinkers with recourse to the Quranic scripture. The Mu'tazili is, therefore, a school of thought that was formed by some of the followers of Al-Hasan al-Basri who have left 'itazala' his circle. This scholarly zeal would not have prospered without proper patronage fostered by the House of Wisdom and Al-Ma'mun, which encouraged the spread of 'Kalam' discourse.

For Al-Mu'tazili, 'Aql' is the judge or Hakim, who "leads necessarily to knowledge," and there is no knowledge without Aql's inquiry since they are both God's creations.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, for Ibn Al-Muqaffa (724-759 AD), who has often been called the 'Muslim Socrates,' happiness, which he equates with the attainment of knowledge, can be acquired through both religion and Aql. Ibn Al-Muqaffa discusses the use of 'ra'y' when the scholar is at a crossroads: "Except for the things which have this been authoritatively laid down, God has left the rest of the things to *ra'y* ... which seems to mean deriving correct inferences from authoritative sources, and using ingenuity and discretion in enforcing them."<sup>69</sup> His execution had much to do with his "own brilliant, ironic, and original imagination and his barely concealed disdain for narrow religious learning."<sup>70</sup> Fascinated by logic, he believed that 'al-aql' the logical man was "defined not only by his intellect but also by the need to 'dispute with his own soul.'"<sup>71</sup> Much like Plato, Ibn Al-Muqaffa believed that al-aql's most tenacious rival is "passion or caprice (*hawa*)," and that the logical man "must be armed with patience, humility and pursuit of learning."<sup>72</sup> Ibn Al-Muqaffa was, in that sense, a trailblazer, whose favourable disposition towards logic and rhetoric shaped the essence of the House of Wisdom and marked the spirit of the age to come. In his opinion, wisdom was the ultimate pursuit:

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<sup>66</sup> Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Smirnov, "Causality and Islamic Thought," p. 493.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, p. 52.

<sup>69</sup> Ansaris, "Islamic Juristic Terminology before Safi'i."

<sup>70</sup> Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, p. 93.

<sup>71</sup> Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, p. 93.

<sup>72</sup> Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought*, p. 93.



Such was the interest of our predecessors in knowledge that if one of them would see a door of knowledge unlocked or sound reasoning uncovered, even when dwelling a forsaken land, he would engrave this wisdom on rocks lest this learning be lost to posterity.<sup>73</sup>

This statement exemplifies the temperament of the Islamic wisdom tradition, which is marked by the inclusive variables of ‘Fitrah’ and ‘Aql’ that seek enrichment through exposure and that resist intellectual stagnation: “Intellectual resistance to engagement with ‘other cultures’ is severely hampered by the tendency to reify the concept of ‘culture’ and to conceive of ‘cultures’ as self-contained and static entities.”<sup>74</sup> Renewal is one of the attributes that the Prophet exalted: “At the turn of each century, there will arise in this *ummah* (the Muslim community) those who will call for a religious renewal.”<sup>75</sup> As Akbar S. Ahmed points out, the resurgence of Islamic values and intellectual heritage within their cultural context is highly desirable:

For Muslims to confront the world with poise and confidence is to rediscover and begin to repair the mainsprings of Islamic civilisation. They need to rebuild an idea of Islam that includes justice, integrity, tolerance, and the quest for knowledge—the classic Islamic civilisation—not just the insistence on the rituals; not just the five pillars of Islam, but the entire building.<sup>76</sup>

The House of Wisdom scholars, whether Kalam, jurists, historians, or otherwise, were significant contributors to the Islamic wisdom tradition thanks to their work with logic, philosophy, translation, and ethics, setting the groundwork for the liberal arts as indispensable parts of the journey toward ‘Hikmah.’

## Conclusion

By building cross-cultural connections between Islamic Wisdom educational practices and the Western philosophical tradition, this study challenges dominant perceptions that regard Muslim philosophical endeavours “as either a narrow apologetic exercise or an essentially foreign import into Islam.”<sup>77</sup> The initiation of cultural dialogic encounters that seek commonalities and support multiple approaches has become relatively rare. The history of the relations between Islam and the West brings important lessons for today, considering the negative perceptions of Islam frequently found in Western media. In order to diversify our philosophical and learning practices, promote plurality, and enact intercultural dialogues in a differing world whose contentiousness looms large,

<sup>73</sup> Al-Muqaffa, *Athar Ibn Al-Muqaffa*, p. 245.

<sup>74</sup> King, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Rosyad, *A Quest for True Islam*, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmed, “Islam and the West,” p. 116.

<sup>77</sup> Winter, “Introduction,” p. 1.

we must rediscover and revisit marginalized wisdom traditions, so we can give shape and name to an approach that acknowledges their contributions and ways of learning. Therefore, a more contextualized understanding of Islamic 'Hikmah' is necessary to address what the tradition has offered, and how it can help heal the rift between the Islamic and Western worlds, whose intellectual and cultural borders were at one time more fluid than they have become today.

Islamic 'Hikmah' represents an integration of the variables of 'Fitrah' and 'Aql' that resist unreceptive attitudes towards intercultural engagement. It is an enactment of interculturality, liberal arts, and pluralistic insights, in which religious renewal is desirable. Al-Masudi's definition of 'Hikmah' as "prudence engendered by experience" asserts its multi-dimensional nature and its potential to reshape itself as new experiences arise and new challenges unfold. Ibn Al-Muqaffa's assertion that 'Aql' engenders 'ra'y' as intermediary is emblematic of Hikmah and its resonance with Al-Farabi. Al-Farabi's numerous books demonstrate a predisposition towards human felicity, a purpose that he shares with Al-Muqaffa, which entails not only the acquisition of intellectual knowledge but also skills of integration and collaboration within a challenging heterogeneous social fabric. Hence, 'Hikmah' is envisioned as a synthesizing agency, an intellectual dynamic in which 'Aql' is tempered by 'Fitrah,' and which fosters reconciliation. In this context, the House of Wisdom serves as a reminder that liberal arts education is not a Western product to be imported but is an essential part of Arab/Muslim education to be upheld, encouraged, and reintroduced into the curriculum. It should be appreciated and upheld for its own philosophical rigor and educational value, and culturally contextualized as a fundamental component of the history of philosophy and Wisdom traditions.

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