



INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ANALYTIC AND ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY/THEOLOGY

GUEST EDITORS

Abbas Ahsan¹ and Marzuqa Karima²

¹ University of Birmingham

² Independent Scholar, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article is an introduction to the special issue on interactions between analytic and Islamic philosophy/theology. Islamic philosophy and theology have historically demonstrated the aptitude and scope in being able to engage with philosophical rationalist traditions beyond classical Islamic civilisation. Articles in this special issue of the European Journal of Analytic Philosophy provide a new and fresh outlook of the relation and influences between Islamic philosophical and theological traditions and the Western (analytic) philosophical tradition.

Keywords: *analytic philosophy; Islamic philosophy/theology; philosophy of religion.*

1. Introduction

Islamic philosophy and theology have historically demonstrated the aptitude and scope in being able to engage with philosophical rationalist traditions beyond classical Islamic civilisation. However, characterising both ‘Islamic philosophy’ and ‘Islamic theology’ has not been an easy matter. The challenges in defining the former seem to stem from the very fact that it has always had diverse intellectual exchanges with traditions it actively engaged.¹ The Western philosophical traditions were no strangers to Islamic philosophy either. The peripatetic tradition classically known as *falsafa* has been influenced for the most part by Greek thought.² Though, we should be careful not to constrain Islamic philosophy to the Arabic term ‘*falsafa*’. That is because *falsafa* no longer represents the broad spectrum of what in English is referred to as ‘philosophy’. Nonetheless, there is a demarcation to be drawn between Islamic and Western philosophy. For Nasr (2006), philosophy in the West relies on the rational and sensuous faculties as a means of arriving at ultimate knowledge. He refers to this as “secularized philosophy” in the sense that it has severed itself from revelatory (i.e., religious, knowledge). For Islamic philosophy, on the other hand, pursuing ultimate knowledge with the means of reason and the senses is instead a supplementary task, given the limitations of human faculties. Consequently, the meaning and role of Islamic philosophy is largely determined by an Islamic ethos. An Islamic ethos presupposes the authority of sacred texts such as the Qur’ān and Hadith traditions. Islamic philosophy considers the fundamental articles of the Islamic faith as foundational beliefs, to be supplemented and explicated via philosophy.

The name for ‘Islamic theology’ was *ilm al-kalam*, which literally meant “the science of discourse”. Islamic theology was best understood as dialectical theology and Muslim theologians were considered dialecticians (Ormsby 2011). However, as to whether Islamic theology ought to be considered as coterminous with *kalāmīc* discourse, is where defining ‘Islamic theology’ becomes contentious. Winter (2008) states that historically the treatment of theological topics took place across a wide array of disciplines. More prominently, the discourse of *kalām* deployed ideas and methodological techniques from *falsafa* up until the point that

¹ The debate begins with whether it should be called ‘Islamic philosophy’ or ‘Arabic philosophy’ (*falsafa*). Peter Adamson (2016) chooses to use the broader phrase ‘philosophy in the Islamic world’. For Fakhry (1970) these exchanges took place with Syrians, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, and others. For Pines (1937), the engagement with diverse philosophical traditions is what distinguishes Islamic philosophy from European philosophy.

² “It is widely acknowledged that the origins of Arabic-Islamic philosophy are to be found in the transmission of a great amount of texts both from classical Greece—some Plato and virtually the whole of the Aristotelian corpus—and post-classical Greek thought, from Hellenism to late antiquity” (D’Ancona 2000, 869).

falsafa was integrated into *kalām* during Islam's post-classical period.³ The interaction between Islamic philosophy and theology has loosely been termed 'Islamic philosophical theology' or 'Islamic doctrinal theology'.

From this perspective, Islamic theology would be a systematic discourse pertaining to creedal matters that is not confined to the *kalām*ic discourse. The question then perhaps is not about whether Islamic theology is constitutive of *kalām* or not; since it is somewhat indisputable that the *kalām*ic discourse formed an integral part of Islamic theology during the classical period.⁴ Instead, it is about the extent to which the *kalām*ic discourse should constitute Islamic theology and what other, if any, disciplines may construct a method of doing Islamic theology.

In recent decades, theologians have turned their attention to analytic philosophy as a mode of engagement with theological topics using the tools and ambitions of analytic philosophy.⁵ Although it sustains no precise characterisation, analytic philosophy is prized for its distinctive theoretical virtues that are constitutive of its methodological approach.⁶ These would be inclusive, although not exhaustive, of enduring methodological commitments, such as style and ambitions.⁷ The style may consist of clarity, rigor, and coherence (Soames 2003). The ambitions according to Rea (2009) are (i) to identify human scope and limitations in obtaining knowledge of the world, and (ii) to provide such true explanatory theories as humanly possible to areas of non-scientific inquiry (such as metaphysics, morality and so on).

The 'theological turn' to analytic philosophy started out as a predominantly Christian one. Its mode of engagement created substantial ground for Christian philosophical theology to develop in virtue of the analytic philosophical tradition. Just to be clear, we are not here referring to what

³ Griffel (2021) suggests that scholars now think that *kalām* should not be an independent discipline that makes up philosophy.

⁴ "The term "classical" is used to cover the era which stretches between the qur'anic revelation and the eighteenth century, with the accent falling on the period between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. For most of this "classical" period the *kalām*, literally "discourse", that is to say, the formal academic discipline which one scholar aptly calls "Islamic doctrinal theology", stood at or very near the apex of the academic curriculum" (Winter 2008, 2).

⁵ Defining analytic philosophy may include, expressing its departing characteristics from continental philosophy (Zimmerman 2007). Alternatively, we may choose to concentrate on its historical trajectory in the English-speaking world and continental Europe (Soames 2003). Further still, we may choose to identify it as a methodological field and focus on what the term 'analytic' implies (Soames 2003; Dummert 1993).

⁶ "If there is anything that might provide a defining characteristic of 'analytic' philosophy, then the obvious candidate—as the very name suggests—is the role played by *analysis*" (Beaney 2013, 10).

⁷ "Far greater potential for characterization of analytic philosophy lies in considerations of method and style. As far as style is concerned, analytic philosophy is widely regarded as placing emphasis on argumentation, clarity, and rigour" (Beaney 2013, 24).

might be called analytic philosophy of religion, which is concerned with religious topics such as the nature of religious belief, faith and so on. Instead, we are referring to a contemporary interaction between analytic philosophy and Christian theological doctrine that emerged as a distinctive field, namely, ‘Analytic Theology’.

Although analytic theology may well be considered an outgrowth of analytic philosophy of religion, it does possess some distinctive characteristics.⁸ However, its precise nature, characteristics, and methodology remains an active area of dispute. Its founders characterise analytic theology as a theological method in philosophical theology which approaches substantive theological topics with the tools and ambitions of analytic philosophy. This broad characterisation of analytic theology as simply a *method* of doing theology can also extend to other theistic traditions. For our purposes, we are particularly concerned with Islamic philosophical theology.

But why should Islamic theologians feel the need to interact with analytic philosophy? Should it be for the same reasons why Islamic philosophy interacted with a wide range of philosophical traditions in the past? Though this would seem to give the impression that Islamic philosophy is not exclusively a *philosophy* in its own right. Instead, it is just a synthesis of selective ideas and methods that have been neatly appropriated for its own utility. Perhaps this is what drove Russell (1961) in thinking that it did not involve original thought. For him, notable proponents of this tradition such as Avicenna and Averroes were ‘essentially commentators’ of Greek thought. Firstly, Russell’s claim is clearly predicated on a particular definition of ‘philosophy’. For Islamic philosophers, philosophy was something vastly diverse.⁹ Secondly, there are now extensive studies

⁸ “Specifically, the idea is that analytic philosophy of religion investigates questions pertaining to theism in general, whereas analytic theology investigates those questions that pertain to claims about God which are found in the Christian religious tradition in particular” (Baker-Hytch 2016, 4).

“For now, the label “analytic theology” functions as a quick and easy way of letting you know what you are getting when you wade into this particular kind of inquiry: you get certain presuppositions and assumptions and not others, a certain kind of writing, appeals to some intellectual influences and interlocutors but not others, a certain set of intellectual villains, and so forth. In my view, the label “analytic theology” is better as a shorthand description for this kind of inquiry than the more venerable “philosophical theology”. It is better because it is more specific. There are many different kinds of intellectual work that can justifiably be called philosophical theology—Kant uses the term, Schleiermacher uses the term, and there are many contemporary forms of philosophical theology that have nothing to do with analytic philosophy. The label “analytic theology” describes those that do” (Wood 2021, 8).

⁹ “1 Philosophy (alfalsafah) is the knowledge of all existing things qua existents (ashya’ al-mawjudah bi ma hiya mawjudah)?

2 Philosophy is knowledge of divine and human matters.

3 Philosophy is taking refuge in death, that is, love of death.

showing how Islamic philosophers did not merely commentate on Greek works but made novel contributions to them. One notable medium and universally recognized resource for philosophical research, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, has published several articles on the contributions of Islamic philosophy.

Notwithstanding this, the interaction between Islamic philosophy and theology, and analytic philosophy should not be considered a one-way interaction. It is highly likely that Islamic philosophers and theologians go on to make novel advancements in the field of analytic philosophy. Moreover, it is only after a thorough engagement with analytic philosophy would Islamic philosophers and theologians be in an informed position to ascertain which elements (concepts and methods) are amenable and which are not with the Islamic tradition. In this case it would be an exploration of analytic philosophy to determine its viability toward an Islamic theological end. This has become particularly evident with the advent of Christian analytic theology.

Though, elements from analytic philosophy that prove amenable for the Christian tradition would not mean that they prove amenable for the Islamic tradition. The test of amenability lifts the obligation on Islamic theologians to engage in what they might refer to as ‘Islamic analytic theology’ *in virtue* of an analytic-Christian-theology-model, or more broadly an analytic-Christian-philosophy-of-religion. The advent and ongoing advancement of analytic Christian theology may have demonstrated the theological viability of such an interaction in virtue of the analytic style and ambitions that are championed for their theoretical virtues. However, those virtues may be antithetical to what Islamic theological norms aim to preserve (such as divine mystery, scriptural authority and so on) (see Ahsan 2017, 2019, 2020).

The aforementioned obligation may be motivated by the groundwork laid, and advancements made by Christian theologians/philosophers in those areas. The scholarly success and attention that has been achieved, thus far, in the Christian tradition may have subtly (and perhaps even inadvertently) set the ‘standards’ of what analytic theology should look like and how it should be done. If this is the case, then whatever progress is to be made in ‘Islamic analytic theology’, or even more broadly in analytic-Islamic-

4 Philosophy is becoming God-like to the extent of human ability.

5 It [philosophy] is the art (sind’ah) of arts and the science (Him) of sciences.

6 Philosophy is predilection for hikmah.

The Islamic philosophers meditated upon these definitions of falsafah which they inherited from ancient sources and which they identified with the Qur’anic term hikmah believing the origin of hikmah to be divine” (Nasr and Leaman 1996, 59).

philosophy-of-religion, would unfortunately be a near-enough replica of the Christian tradition in these areas. The Islamic tradition would be curbed in making any novel contributions to the field; the kind which should be developed on its own grounds.

This raises the question on what the nature of the *interaction* between Islamic theology and analytic philosophy ought to be. The test of amenability seems to allow for the nature of the interaction to come in degrees of strength.

Islamic theologians may choose to passively interact with analytic philosophy. This kind of interaction needn't compel the theologian in subscribing to analytic philosophy's style and ambitions. In such a case the theologian may not be seeking to bring the style, ambitions, and ideas derived from the growing body of analytic literature to bear on theological topics. She may only be seeking to explore analytic methods and ideas to determine their theological amenability.

This weaker interaction¹⁰ between theology and analytic philosophy needn't fall under the rubric of analytic theology, philosophical theology,¹¹ or philosophy of religion more generally.¹² That is because a common ambition in all these domains is that the tools of philosophy are used for a theological end. This interaction may thus be considered a meta-methodological one. That is because it seeks to determine which methodological prescriptions of analytic philosophy encroach upon theological norms. This is opposed to a stronger interaction. A stronger interaction would prescribe the theologian to employ the style and ambitions of analytic philosophy in a

¹⁰ We do not think this interaction can be construed a procedural use of reasoning. As Crisp (2009) states a procedural use of reason is more pliable and sympathetic to human social and psychological sensibilities. It purports a normative use of daily reasoning abilities that is common to every layman. That is whether it is making logical connections between different propositions or attempting to make intelligible sense of something. It would, in essence, allow for people to distinguish between sensible and non-sensible propositions and decipher their meanings. This is contrasted with a substantive use of reasoning. This is a radical and insistent activity. It purports that reason alone, or reason along with the senses, is the only way we can obtain foundational and non-trivial knowledge of the world we live in. It is exclusively with the aid of this mode of reasoning that we can apprehend and make intelligible sense of the world around us. In either case, it would presuppose buying into a method of reasoning which loosely falls under the rubric of analytic philosophy.

¹¹ "Philosophical theology, as I understand it, uses the tools of philosophy to investigate the theological claims made by a specific religious tradition. Thus, Christian philosophical theology investigates the meaning, coherence, and truth of specifically Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the incarnation, and the atonement" (Wood 2021, 7).

¹² "(...) philosophy of religion—or, at least, analytic philosophy of religion—is to use the tools of philosophy to investigate arguments for and against the existence of God, as well as to investigate the properties or attributes that the major monotheistic traditions would ascribe to God: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so forth. Philosophy of religion, in short, concerns what might be called (non-pejoratively, at least here) "bare theism."" (Wood 2021, 7)

manner that would characterise it under the rubric of analytic theology. Moreover, this interaction would presuppose a clear intent in how the theologian is anticipating to approach theological topics.

The aim of this special issue is to initiate an explorative project on possible interactions between analytic philosophy and Islamic philosophy and theology. The viability of such an interaction and its amenability with the Islamic tradition is a decision we leave to the reader. However, to allow for a full appreciation of the questions in the reader's assessment of the interaction, this issue contains contributions that span across both analytic philosophy and Islamic philosophy/theology. More importantly, we hope that the readers will begin to acknowledge that Islamic philosophy can be considered a *philosophy* in its own right, and one that ought to be pursued on its own grounds.

2. Papers in the Special Issue

The first three papers demonstrate the viability of the Islamic philosophical tradition in being able to provide novel contributions to contemporary questions on its own grounds. The first of these papers addresses the question of how two distinct philosophical traditions, both of which rely on their own knowledge structures can be brought into conversation. Can an interaction with Islamic philosophy ever be conducted in a manner where one does not become vulnerable to Said's critique of orientalism which enables a distortion of the Islamic philosophical heritage. **Anthony Booth** ([this issue](#)) addresses this concern by introducing what he terms an 'Analytic, Fārābian' conception of Orientalism. He achieves this by reformulating a binary conception of knowledge to a graded one using analytic tools.

Imran Aijaz's ([this issue](#)) and **Edward Moad's** ([this issue](#)) papers go further by demonstrating that the resort to reason is an integral part of the Islamic philosophical tradition. They challenge earning the right to hold beliefs in the absence of reason as it would amount to a philosophy of some kind. Both papers challenge the Muslim school of 'traditionalism' associated with *Ibn Hanbal* and *Ibn Taymiyya*. Aijaz demonstrates the inevitability of philosophising using al-Kindi's protreptic argument while Moad critiques the philosophy of formulating the right to hold such beliefs.

The next part focuses on analytic theological topics rather than the interaction between Islamic philosophical theology and analytic philosophy *in themselves*. They range from both ontological and epistemological treatments of the topics in a way that may be considered a

more sympathetic approach to the aims and ambitions of analytic philosophy.

Ayşenur Ünügür Tabur's ([this issue](#)), **Behnam Zolghadr's** ([this issue](#)), and **Khalil Andani's** ([this issue](#)) papers offer ontological arguments on how we conceive of God, His essence, and attributes. Among these arguments, the papers explore Christian and Islamic models of divine simplicity and whether they are amenable to an Islamic conception of God. Alternatively, **Shoaib Malik** and **Nazif Muhtaroglu** ([this issue](#)) offer a contingency-informed theology that is not constrained to a specific ontological model by engaging an interaction between modern science and Islamic philosophical theology. Finally, **Seyma Yazici** ([this issue](#)) proposes to balance the scales by ascribing divine justice as the controlling attribute for all other constitutive attributes of God.

The final paper of this series provides a corrective to the idea that an Islamic theological and philosophical interaction with analytic philosophy will adhere to the normative dimensions of a Christian-analytic-theological-model and will interact with analytic tools in the same way as the latter. **Abbas Ahsan** and **Marzuqa Karima** ([this issue](#)) offer a perspective on how doctrine or scriptural authority can direct philosophical thought by subscribing to an anti-exceptionalist view of logic. What this means is if an Islamic theologian encounters a conflict between a theological norm and a logical system, an anti-exceptionalist logic allows for the Islamic theologian to prioritise the theological norm without abandoning logic entirely. It offers a wider theoretical scope for the Islamic theologian to operate within the analytic tradition in a theologically context-sensitive manner. It closes the series by going beyond the viability of an interaction between Islamic philosophical theology and analytic philosophy to exploring new terrain for conducting Islamic philosophical theology.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Shahanaz Begum for reading an earlier draft of this introduction and providing valuable suggestions. We would also like to thank the Editor-in-Chief of EuJAP, Marko Jurjako, for his editorial input. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

REFERENCES

- Adamson, Peter. 2016. *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps vol. 3*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ahsan, Abbas. 2017. "A Realist Approach in Analytic Theology and the Islamic Tradition". *Philosophy and Theology* 29 (1): 101-132. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol2016111073>
- . 2019. "Quine's Ontology and the Islamic Tradition". *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 36 (2): 20-63.
- . 2020. "Analytic Theology and its Method". *Philotheos* 20 (2): 173-211. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philotheos202020213>
- Baker-Hytch, Max. 2016. "Analytic Theology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion: What's the Difference?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4: 347-361. <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2016-4.120023010007a>
- Beaney, Michael. 2013. "What is Analytic Philosophy". In *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Michael Beaney, 3-29. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crisp Oliver D. 2009. "On Analytic Theology". In *Analytic Theology New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, edited by Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea, 33-53. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- D'Ancona, Cristina. 2000. "The origins of Islamic philosophy". In *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson, 869-893. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dummett, Michael. 1993. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fakhry, Majid. 1970. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd edition. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Griffel, Frank. 2021. *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- López-Farjeat, Luis Xavier. 2022. *Classical Islamic Philosophy a Thematic Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1996. "Introduction". In *Routledge History of World Philosophies Volume 1 History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, 43-55. Oxon: Routledge.
- . 2006. *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ormsby, Eric. 2011. "Islamic Theology". In *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, edited by William Edelglass, and Jay L. Garfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pines, Shlomo. 1937. "Some Problems of Islamic Philosophy". *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad) 11: 66-80.

- Rea, Michael. 2009. "Introduction". In *Analytic Theology New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, edited by Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea, 1-30. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2022. "Analytic Theology". In *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. Accessed December 18, 2022.
<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/AnalyticTheology>
- Russell, Bertrand. 1961. *History of Western Philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Soames, Scott. 2003. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Winter, Timothy. 2008. "Introduction". In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Timothy Winter, 1-16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres.
- Wood, William. 2021. *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zimmerman, D. 2007. "Three Introductory Questions". In *Persons: Human and Divine*, edited by P. V. Inwagen and D. Zimmerman, 1-32. New York: Oxford University Press.