

**Book-Review****POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM: AN  
INTRODUCTORY OUTLINE**

**Erwin I.J. Rosenthal, 1958**  
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**ABSTRACT**

*Rosenthal is a well known figure in academic circles. One of his famous works is Political Thought in the medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline. The key issues addressed in this book are the influence of Greek political thought on the Muslim thinkers as well as their own original contributions to the body of political thought. The author has also discussed, in detail, the influence of Sharia on Muslim Political Philosophy. Although it is a valuable piece of work yet it lacks objective judgments on a number of places while narrating the history of political thought in the Muslim world. Sometimes while going through the work one feels that it reflects the typical western perception of Islam and the Muslim world.*

**BOOK-REVIEW**

Erwin I.J. Rosenthal is a well known name for the students of Muslim Political Thought. He was a professor at Cambridge University England. He was associated with Genizah Research Unit; an organization involved in the interpretation of Hebrew Bible. He wrote a number of articles on the Muslim medieval political thought including “The Place of Politics in the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd.” He also translated Muqadima of Ibn Khaldun into English. The book under review was his first attempt to deal the subject comprehensively. He surveys the chief traditions of Muslim Political Thought from the eighth century to the end of fifteenth century.

In this book Mr. Rosenthal has tried to emphasize upon the two very important factors, Greek political thought and Sharia’, which influenced and shaped the Muslim political thought during medieval Islam. Regarding the first factor two important points are worth noting; firstly the structure of book clearly supports our assumption, where the second part of the book exclusively addresses the influence of Plato’s philosophy over the Muslim political thought; under the title “ The Platonic Legacy”, and secondly the author explicitly writes in the introductory (page 6), “ Moreover, by confining myself to an investigation into the documentary evidence for Platonic ideas and arguments

in the political writings of the principal *Falasifa*, I hope to show the impact which Plato's political philosophy made on Islam". Thus, this statement clearly points towards the author's intent to trace out the influence of Plato's philosophy over the Muslim political thinkers. As for as the role of Sharia' is concerned, the author stated on a number of places in the book that this sharia' is the rock of Islam or it is like a foundation upon which all the theories are constructed (pp3-4). He explicitly admitted that Muslim political thinkers of medieval Isalm "were Muslim philosophers first and followers of their masters Plato and Aristotle second"(p4).

The author has limited his range of enquiry to Sunni Muslim thinkers only. In the introductory (page 5) he justifies it in this way, "Shia doctrine is mixed with a number of extra-Islamic ideas and notions and is too complicated to be treated in this first conspectus of political thought in Islam".

The expected readers of the book are Western students and scholars. We may deduce this from the fact that in the introductory (page8), he writes,

*A final observation concerns the character of Islam in relation to politics as understood by Western students. Unless we grasp this character we cannot appreciate the significance of the caliphate as it is presented in the theory of the khilafa, which serves as introduction and background to this book.*

By referring to Western students he has implied that his readers will by and large be these people. It may be extended beyond this to suggest that if a non-Western student is likely to study this book he/she is, probably, well versed in the Western tradition of knowledge or is trying somehow to be associated with it.

After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts. The first part, entitled "Constitutional Law and Muslim History", begins with a chapter on medieval ideas of happiness and the means to achieve it. This is followed by the accounts of the Classical theories of the caliphate; (Mawardi, Ghazali, Ibn Jama'a and Ibn Taymiya), some secular views on government; (Ibn at-Tiqaqa, Ibn al-Muqafa', and authors of "Mirrors for princes'), and Ibn Khaldun.

The second part "The Platonic Legacy", consists of a general chapter on political philosophy in Islam and studies on the leading political philosophers (Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Baja and Ibn Rushd), finally of Dawwani's collection of a work of Tusi, and three Ottoman writers of the Sixteenth century, including Haji Khalifa. The main thinkers are thus covered in 233 pages; detailed notes, a glossary and the index occupy the remaining third of the book.

Throughout the book the author has touched upon a number of controversial issues. While introducing his work, in the very first paragraph, he gave an implicit impression as Islam has inherited bulk of teachings from Judaism and Christianity. He pointed out towards the daily meeting of Muhammad (SAW) with Jews and Christians (p1). But he was unable to substantiate his claim through any evidence.

In the introductory (page 3) he writes, "The inclusion of Ibn Khaldun, the only political thinker in the strict sense of the term in Islam, requires no justification". Calling Ibn Khaldun the only political thinker, shows his intent of undermining the Muslim political thinkers against the Western political thinkers. He tries to justify his stand point on the subsequent page 4, by saying that the character,

quality and range of speculation of the Muslim political thinkers is limited by the overriding authority of the sharia’.

The term Saada I equated with happiness, which has totally different meanings. The author has wrongly attributed the attainment of happiness as the end of the Muslim society. Where as piety and obedience to God is the end of Muslim society and happiness and satisfaction are bestowed upon them as a reward for their obedience.

On page 21, he attributed the success of Islam in winning the allegiance of independent, proud, born warriors to the material inducements of booty and landed property as the result of the Holy War (Jihad). He is actually trying to interpret history through a materialist point of view. Through this attempt he is trying to undermine the ideological pull of Islam.

On a number of occasions in the book he has erroneously used the term Islam at the place of Muslims. For example on page 23 he writes, “...there were struggles for power in Islam”. On page sixteen he writes, “In Islam the problem of revelation and reason present itself chiefly as the contrast between the divine and human law”.

A considerable number of obscure statements are made by the author; a few may be mentioned here. It is not clear in what sense Ibn Tiqtaqa is a “utilitarian”; on pp.65-66 it is said that his advice to the ruler is directed towards the rulers’ own advantage and security of his throne; which is in no way a utilitarian view.

On page 118 ethics is correctly said to be a practical science according to Aristotle. Yet on the same page it is stated that in Farabi, Ibn Bajja and Ibn Rushd ethics is related to politics as theory to practice. Now this view is not Aristotelian; some explanation is thus needed which he ignores. On pages 166 and 167, Ibn Bajja’s opinion that philosophers in an imperfect state have the right to withdraw from political activity is asserted to be contrary to Plato. But Plato forbade withdrawal only to philosophers in the ideal state.

The book fails to present the leading ideas of Muslim political thought in the historical chronological order. The book out rightly ignored the time frame in which these Muslim political thinkers were living. It must be regarded rather as a collection of studies of individual thinkers. It can also be stated that this book will not be easily intelligible to readers without a previous knowledge of Islamic history and philosophy. The reviewer has found much to criticize in this book, but still it is a good book, which furnishes many an insight to scholars interested in this important subject.