



THE THOUGHT OF IBN RUSHD AND IBN SINA  
AND ITS  
IMPACT ON ST THOMAS AND DESCARTES

BY

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT


This thesis addresses the question of the influence of Islamic legal philosophy on European legal philosophy, in particular the influence of Ibn Rushd on St. Thomas and of Ibn Sina on Descartes. Since the research is historical in nature, the research method is primarily archival. Through the examination of the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Europe the contribution of Islamic legal philosophical scholarship to the sum total of universal legal scholarship has been firmly established. There is clear evidence that, in addressing the question of the harmonization between Revelation and reason, St. Thomas of Aquinas followed the line of thinking that had been set out by Ibn Rushd in the latter's *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maql* (*Decisive Treatise on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*). This study has also found that St. Thomas was indirectly influenced by Ibn Rushd through the work of the Jewish translator and philosopher, Maimonides. Similarly, the research has shown that originality in the foundational ideas of Rene Descartes' theory of knowledge is lacking and that he was greatly influenced by the thought of both Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali. It is hoped that in uncovering some of the common threads in the both Christian and Islamic traditions, in particular as regards the harmony of Divine Revelation and human reason, this study will serve to foster greater dialogue amongst civilizations and greater cross-cultural understanding. In a world today dominated by the power of human reason and the neglect of the Divine, this study has highlighted the need for the human race as a whole to urgently rethink the need for Divine Revelation to guide human reason.

## ملخص البحث

هذه الأطروحة توضح السؤال عن تأثير فلسفة القانون الإسلامي على فلسفة القانون الأوروبي، وبالأخص تأثير ابن رشد على سينت توماس وابن سينا على دسكارتس . في مطلع القرن الواحد والعشرون ( في العصر المسيحي ) ، كان من الضروري أن تشارك في تجديد الفكر خارج العادات الغربية وإعادة تقييم مدى مساهمة فكرة القانون الإسلامي الفلسفي وتأثيره على فلسفة القانون الغربي. بما أن البحوث تاريخية بالطبع ، فإن طبيعة البحث مدونة في السجلات قبل كل شيء. من خلال دراسات انتقال العلم من العالم الإسلامي إلى أوروبا ومساهمة ثقافة القانون الإسلامي الفلسفي على مجموعة ثقافات القانون الشامل - ومساهمة الشعوب الإسلامية المتحضرة بالتراث الفكري العالمي - فإنه وبكل تأكيد ممارسة. هناك دليل واضح بأنه ، من خلال طرح سؤال الانسجام بين الإفشاء والإقناع ، أتبع سينت توماس من أكويناس اتفاقية الفكر والتي وضعت من قبل ابن رشد في الكتاب الأخير فصل المقل (البحث الحاسم لانسجام الديانة والفلسفة ) . وهذه الدراسة وجدة أن سينت توماس كان بطريقة غير مباشرة متأثراً بابن رشد من خلال بحث المترجم والفيلسوف اليهودي ، ميمونيدس. وبطريقة مشابهة ، البحث بين أن الأصالة في الأفكار الأساسية لنظرية ريني دسكارتس العلمية كانت ناقصة ، وأنه كان متأثراً كثيراً بفكرة العالمين ابن سينا والغزالي. إنه من المتمني أن يكون هناك بعض العلاقات الاعتيادية الغير مبيّنة في العادات المسيحية والإسلامية ، وبالأخص الانسجام في الوحي السماوي والإقناع البشري ، هذه الدراسة سوف تنشئ حوار أوسع بين المدنين وسوف تخلق فهم أكبر للعادات المختلفة. السيطرة في عالم اليوم بواسطة قوة الإقناع البشري والإهمال للوحي السماوي ، هذه الدراسة وضحت الاحتياج للأصول البشرية كافة بأن يراجعوا أفكارهم ثانية وبكل أهمية لاحتياج الوحي السماوي لإرشاد الإقناع البشري.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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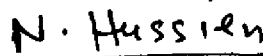


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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father,  
Mohamed Ismail Goolam,  
who passed into the eternal world  
at the young age of 49  
in November 1972

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### PURPOSE OF THE THESIS

In accordance with the problem statement and the title of this thesis the essential purpose of the thesis is to examine the impact and influence of the thought of Islamic legal philosophy on Western legal philosophy. Since this is an extraordinarily broad field of enquiry I have selected to examine the thought of only two Muslim thinkers and their influence on two corresponding Western thinkers. The Muslim thinkers/philosophers selected are Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, while the Western thinkers/philosophers selected are St Thomas of Aquinas and Rene Descartes.

**At the outset it should be made abundantly manifest that, although the title of the thesis may give the impression that what is being examined is the impact of both Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina on both St. Thomas and Descartes, this is not the case. Rather, the thesis examines the influence and impact of Ibn Rushd on St. Thomas and the influence and impact of Ibn Sina on Descartes respectively.**

In assessing the contribution of Islamic legal philosophical scholarship to the sum total of universal legal philosophical scholarship, the purpose, aims and objectives of the research are:

- (i) to make a detailed study of the history and development of Islamic legal philosophical thought in the medieval period;
- (ii) to make a detailed examination of the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Europe;

- (iii) to assess the influence of Islamic thinking on Christian thought as regards the idea of the harmonization of Divine Revelation and human reason.
- (iv) to assess, as regards faith and reason, the influence of Islamic thought on Christian thought and to uncover some of the common threads in these two traditions.

It is hoped that this research will serve to foster greater cross-cultural understanding and greater dialogue amongst civilizations.

Ultimately, this work is intended to contribute to the significant and great work already done by many leading scholars on the contribution of Islamic scholarship to the sum total of universal scholarship. In particular, this work examines the contribution of Islamic legal philosophical scholarship to the sum total of universal legal philosophical scholarship.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

There is a tendency to think of medieval philosophy and medieval legal philosophy as being equivalent to the philosophical thought of medieval western Christendom. However, the impact and influence of Islamic philosophical thought on Western philosophical thought and the West's indebtedness to it has not been acknowledged to the same degree which Islamic scholars have acknowledged their indebtedness to the earlier Greek thought. For example, al-Kindi stated that one should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth and to assimilate it from any source, even if that source be foreign to one's own culture and traditions.

The impact and influence of Islamic philosophical thought on the West can only be assessed through an in-depth analysis of Islamic philosophical thought in the medieval period. This requires, *inter alia*, yet most significantly, an examination of

the great intellectual activity of Islamic Spain – also known as the golden era of al-Andalus – in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of the Christian era.

Since this objective involves an extremely wide field of enquiry, the research will focus on the impact and influence of the thought and ideas of only two Islamic philosophers on the thought and ideas of two Western philosophers. The research will thus focus on:

- (i) the impact and influence of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on St. Thomas;
- (ii) the impact and influence of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) on Descartes.

At the dawn of the 21st century (of the Christian era) it is necessary to engage in a renewal of thought outside the Western tradition and to reappraise the contribution of Islamic legal philosophical thought and its impact on Western legal philosophical thought.

It is necessary to reassess the contribution – or to further contribute to this process - of Islamic legal philosophical scholarship thought to the sum total of universal legal philosophical scholarship.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Since the research is historical in nature, the research method is primarily archival in nature.

## **CHAPTERIZATION**

The thesis comprises six chapters:

**Chapter 1** is entitled *Introduction* and its purpose is to place the impact and influence of Islamic legal philosophical thought on Western legal philosophical

thought in its broader context as well as briefly examining the significance to Europe of its meeting with the Islamic world.

**Chapter 2** is entitled *The history and development of Islamic philosophical thought* and its purpose is to examine, in the light of the Greek legacy of knowledge, the contributions of the leading Eastern and Western Muslim philosophers.

**Chapter 3** is entitled *The transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Europe* and its purpose is to embark on a detailed analysis of the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Europe, with particular emphasis on the contribution of Islamic Spain.

**Chapter 4** is entitled *The influence of Ibn Rushd on St. Thomas* and its purpose is to examine the impact and influence of the thought of Ibn Rushd on that of St. Thomas of Aquinas. The focus is on the idea of the harmonization of Divine Revelation and human reason.

**Chapter 5** is entitled *The influence of Ibn Sina on Descartes* and its purpose is to examine the impact and influence of the thought of Ibn Sina on that of Rene Descartes, who is regarded in the West as the father of modern philosophy. The focus is on the ideas of doubt and skepticism, dualism and the existence of Allah or God.

**Chapter 6** is entitled *Conclusion* and its purpose is to reassert the most important and salient aspects of each of the previous chapters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There can be no doubt, indeed there is no doubt that much has been written on the topic of the influence of Islam on medieval Europe in general by both Muslim and non-Muslim writers over the past one hundred years. The work of Montgomery Watt, Arberry, De Santillana, Schacht, SM Imamuddin and CG Weeramantry and DM



Dunlop are but a few names that can be mentioned in this regard. In the same vein much has also been written on the influence of Islamic philosophic thought on European philosophical thought. Names that spring to mind in this regard as very important contributors are AM Goichon, Dimitri Gutas, Gerhard Endress, George Hourani, MM Sharif, MS Khan, Charles Burnett and Anna Akasoy.

Notwithstanding the works and writings of these contemporary and earlier scholars, the research already conducted and completed has by no means exhausted the need for further enquiries into this vast terrain. Much remains to be accomplished, much remains to be discovered in this vast garden of knowledge. Indeed it is, by its very nature, an area of knowledge in which research findings can never be completely exhausted. One pertinent example in this respect is the work of Josep Fontana, *The Distorted Past A Reinterpretation of Europe*, which was published just a decade ago.

As to what still needs to be accomplished in this field of enquiry is evident from the statements made by Imamuddin as well as Endress and Kruk. Imamuddin writes:

Muslim Spain played a great role in the social and cultural history of the medieval Muslim and Christian world. There were three routes through which Muslim civilization passed to Christendom, namely Spain Sicily and Syria. Muslims played the leading part in it, and Hispano-Arab civilization served as a beacon of light in the darkness of medieval

Europe. But enough is not known about this part of history. Only a selected few have the knowledge of the existence of the high civilization of medieval Spain, the main reason being that it remained neglected by scholars [for] so long. Only recently some have begun to take interest in it. However, it is an immense task which deserves the attention of many scholars to piece together a complete picture of the entire scene.

While Endress and Kruk add:

The heritage of ancient Greece played a major role in the development of philosophy and science in the Islamic world. The groundwork was laid by the translators of the 8th and 9th centuries, whose Arabic and

Syriac versions made the works of Greek philosophers and scientists – foremost among them Aristotle – accessible to the scholars of the Arab world. In the wake of the translation movement an impressive intellectual tradition developed, and the names of its leading representatives remain well known until the present day: Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides – to name but a few – are familiar names both inside and outside the Islamic world. The transmission of the Greek heritage to the Islamic world, and subsequently to medieval Europe, is an area where much has been achieved during the past decades, but where large areas also still remain to be studied.

For me, however, the need and relevance of further research in this field is most strikingly encapsulated in the following quotation – which appears on the quotation page - from one of the works of Rom Landau.

The story of how Greek philosophy was discovered by the Muslims and then transmitted by them to the West provides one of the most fascinating chapters in the book of mankind's progress from Ignorance to enlightenment.

Research into this 'most fascinating chapter' can never be exhausted. Indeed, since this 'most fascinating chapter' involves 'mankind's progress from ignorance to enlightenment' – from darkness to light, as it were – and the seeking of truth, enquiries into it can never be said to be exhausted. Can the seeking of truth and the seeking of the ultimate truth ever be complete or exhausted?

In addition to these substantiations for the need for further enquiry into this field, it is important to note that most of the studies done were completed before September 11, 2001. Since that date, and in the light of the controversial utterances of Pope Benedict XVI in September 2006 as well the West's recent equating Islam with terrorism, there is, I firmly believe, a need to reassess the foundational values of Islam and its emphasis on reason and logic and to dispel the notion and the distorted image of Islam as a religion of violence and of the sword.

There is also an urgent need in our world today to realize and acknowledge that human reason needs to be guided by Divine Revelation. We need to return to the idea

of a harmonization of Revelation and reason. We need to return to the idea of a harmonization of faith and reason. This vital importance of this need is beginning to be realized by many. In March 2008 the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, which is based at the Washington Catholic Centre for the Study of Culture and Values, held a month-long seminar at which it launched a project called *A Project on Faith and Reason: Fidelity in our Times*. The Council stated that there is an urgent need for the deep exploration of the relation of faith and reason, of religion and modern life. This, it stated, requires sharing our common experiences and insight and to thinking creatively about how faith can be lived fully and wholesomely.

And on the 22 March 2008 one of the most prominent – and sometimes controversial - contemporary Muslim intellectuals, Tariq Ramadan, was interviewed on a programme called *The Philosopher's Zone*. The central issue of the interview was the relationship between Islam and philosophy. In it he once again highlighted the fact that Islam had shared its insights with the West. He referred to the period of doubt which al-Ghazali had experienced in his life and how this helped him to discover the truth and to the fact that this approach influenced Descartes' fundamental premise *cogito ergo sum* - I think therefore I am. On being asked whether there is a direct connection between the thought of the two thinkers or whether this was simply a case of two great minds thinking alike, Ramadan reasserted the point that the roots of Western philosophy are to be founded in Islamic philosophy in the medieval period.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The dead, and in particular the long dead, are similarly authoritative in the field and discipline of philosophy and legal philosophy. However, before looking at what the dead have said, what have the living said concerning the relevance of the ideas of

Revelation and reason as well as the legacy of Islamic knowledge in the world today. The year 2006 was a year in which some quite significant, and sometimes controversial, statements were made on this issue. The significant statements were uttered by Paul Boateng and Paul Zeleza. The former is the UK High Commissioner to South Africa while the latter is Liberal Arts Research Professor and Professor of African Studies and History at Pennsylvania State University in the United States of America.

In a lecture entitled "*Faith and Politics: A Global Perspective*" and delivered as part of the Africa Dialogue Lecture series at the Centre for International Political Studies at the University of Pretoria in November 2006<sup>1</sup> Paul Boateng stated that the second largest religion in the United Kingdom is Islam, having almost two million adherents. They are represented with distinction in every walk of life and in both Houses of Parliament. He added that the links between the United Kingdom and the Islamic world go back many centuries and that the British Museum in London contains an eighth-century gold coin, with Arabic text on both sides, minted by King Offa of Mercia. He went on to allude to the debt of Europe to the scholars of Islam.

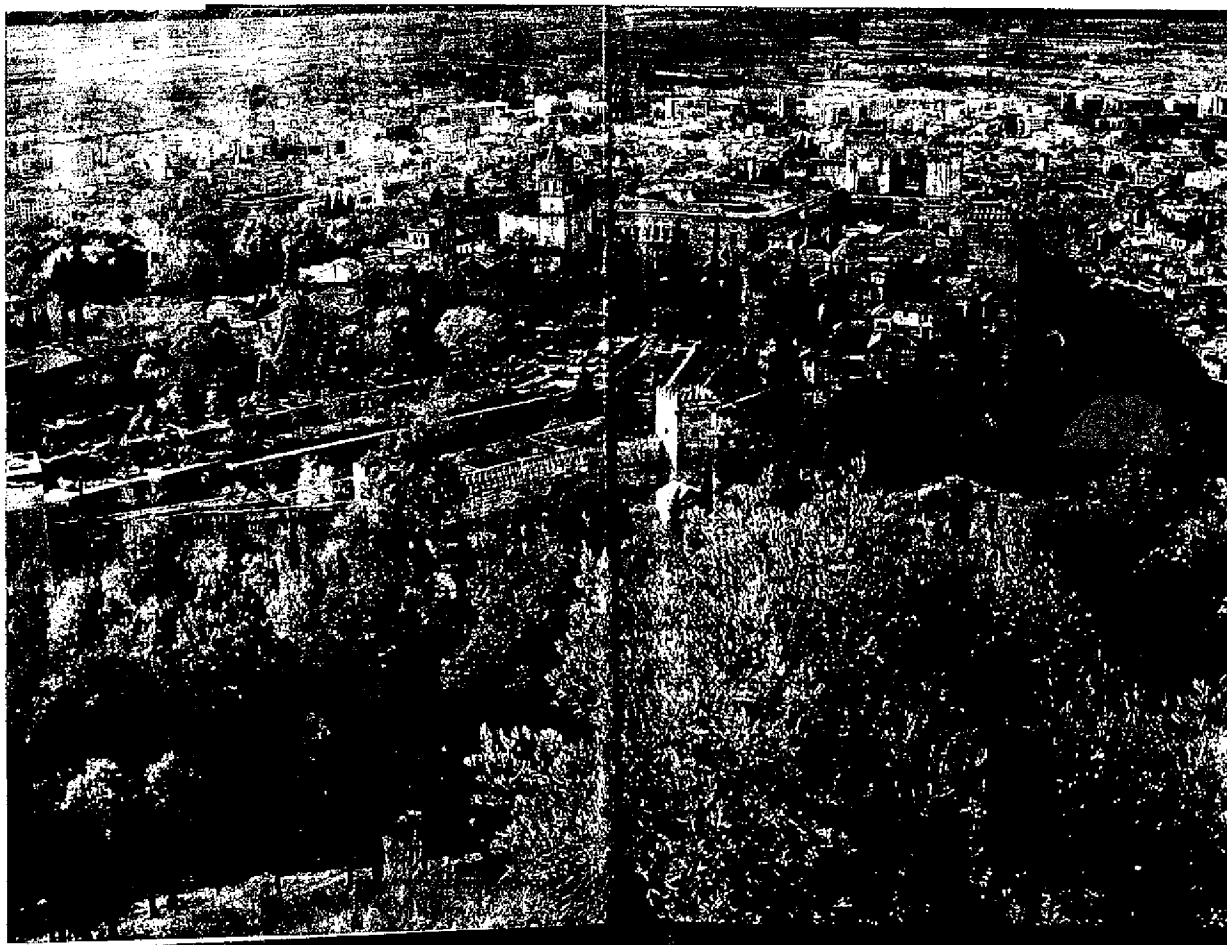
Boateng went on to say that there is a great need today to protect the integrity of all our traditions and to acknowledge and celebrate our rich diversity which, at the end of the day, is our only guarantee against a uniform and monocultural global culture. In contrast to the 'clash of civilisations' debate Boateng referred to the concept of an 'alliance of civilisations'. In emphasizing the importance of recognizing the role of faith he stated that one of the key principles in this alliance should be the recognition of a diversity of civilizations and cultures as a basic feature of human society and a driving force for human progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture delivered on 20 November 2006.

The scholars of Islam referred to by Boateng include, of course, scholars from diverse disciplines. They include scholars in the fields of commerce, science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, law, philosophy and the arts, including the art of 'gracious living'. Montgomery Watt writes that the Arabs of Spain used a wide variety of materials from agriculture and mining to enhance the pleasures of life, at least for those well-off. He writes:

The modern tourist, entranced by the beauty of the Alcazar of Seville or the Alhambra<sup>2</sup>, surmises something of the luxurious life of those who once lived there; and the student of literature gains further glimpses of this style of 'gracious living' from anecdotes and poems.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> The author of this thesis was fortunate enough to visit the Alcazar, as well as the Giralda in Seville, in June 2007 and also the Alhambra in Granada (known as Garnata during Muslim rule) on two occasions, May 2005 and June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 23.

As far as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza is concerned, on the 7 August 2006 he delivered the annual Founders Lecture at the University of South Africa. His lecture was entitled “*Critical Issues in Higher Education and Intellectual Development in Africa*”. In outlining the history of higher education in Africa he stated that its origins can be traced to three institutional traditions. They are:

- (i) the Alexandria Museum and Library established in the third century BC in Egypt. This went on to become the largest centre of learning in the ancient world and left a rich legacy of scholarship covering a number of disciplines including mathematics, science, philosophy and religion;
- (ii) in Egypt monasteries were begun in the third century AD and they served as significant spaces for learning, writing and reflection;
- (iii) the third tradition gave Africa its first higher education institution. This was the tradition of Islam.

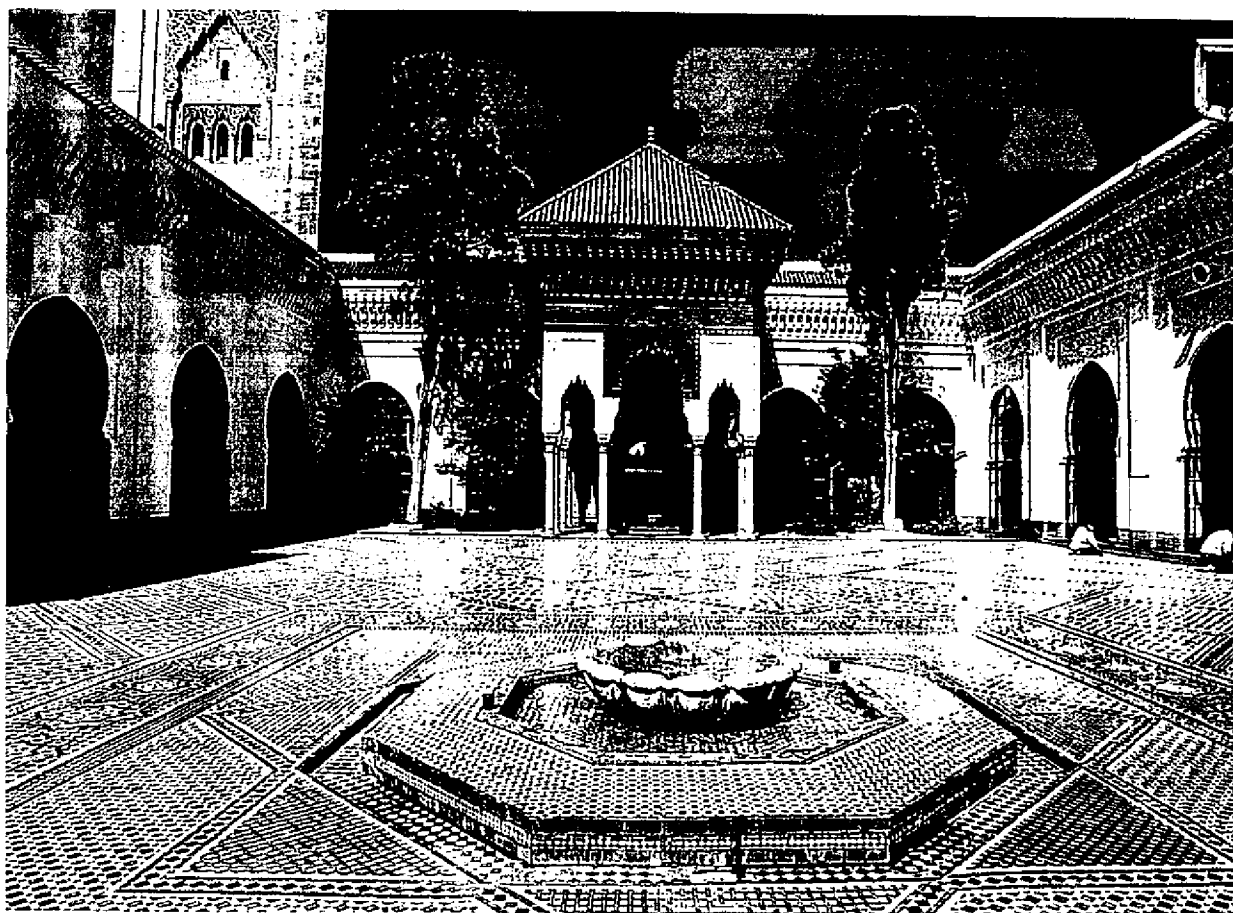
In respect of the third tradition, Zeleza states that Africa claims the distinction as the centre of the world’s first Islamic universities and some of the world’s oldest surviving universities. These include *Al-Zitouna* founded in Tunis in 732 and *Al-Qarawiyyin* – also spelt *Karaouine* - mosque and university complex founded in Fez in 859. The latter attracted students and scholars from Andalusia and West Africa. In 969 the *Al-Azhar* mosque and university complex was established in Cairo. The *Al-Azhar* came to be regarded as the most prestigious centre of Islamic education and scholarship and attracted the greatest intellectuals in the Muslim world, including the renowned historian Ibn Khaldun.<sup>4</sup> Another very important Islamic university was the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn Khaldun also spent five years of his life in Fez, from 755 -760 (in the Islamic era). See further Mohammad Abdullah Enan, *Ibn Khaldun His Life and Works* (New Delhi: Khitab Bhavan, 2006) 11-28.

*Sankore* mosque and university complex founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Timbuktu.<sup>5</sup>

Courses taught here included theology, logic, rhetoric, astronomy, astrology, history and geography.



Zeleza adds that the legacy of the ancient Islamic university for modern Africa is threefold. He writes:

First, many of the Islamic universities have survived to the present, although they have undergone major changes over the centuries...Second, in recent times new Islamic universities have been created in several countries often patterned on the old Islamic universities as part of the wave of privatization of higher education as state control has loosened. Third, the “western” university introduced in Africa from the [nineteenth] century bore Islamic influences. Europeans inherited from the Muslims a huge corpus of knowledge, rationalism and the investigative approach to knowledge, an elaborate disciplinary

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<sup>5</sup> Also spelt Timbuctoo, Timbuctu, Tinbuktu and Tombuto. See further NMI Goolam “The Timbuktu Manuscripts – Rediscovering a Written Source of African Law in the Era of the African Renaissance” in *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2006): 29-50.

architecture of knowledge, the notions of individual scholarship, and the idea of the college, all of which became central features of the European university exported to the rest of the world with the rise of European imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

On the 8 August 2006 Zeleza presented another paper, entitled “*The Pasts and Futures of African History: A Generational Inventory*”, in the History Department at the University of South Africa. Examining the intellectual trends in African historiography, he once again made reference to the very significant contribution of the Islamic tradition. He refers to Ibn Khaldun as one of the greatest historians of all time and states that his monumental work, *Al-Muqaddimah*<sup>7</sup>, provided the first serious challenge to providential history. Zeleza argues that Ibn Khaldun’s work postulated a cyclical theory of history and that he anticipated modern historical methodology. Zeleza reiterated what he had said the previous day at the Founders Lecture, saying that Muslim scholars from North Africa and West Africa produced numerous works on West African societies. Among these are the well-known *Tarikh al-Sudan* and *Tarikh al-Fattash*, both of which were written in Timbuktu in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the section of his paper entitled ‘Towards a new global history of Africa and humanity’ Zeleza declares that ‘no amount of historiographical conceit can hide the fact that Europe has not always been the dominant part of the world’ and that ‘the rise of Europe to global dominance is fairly recent: until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the Muslim world was dominant in much of the Afro-Eurasian world’.

In the light of the utterances of both Paul Zeleza and Paul Boateng, it would not be out of place, at this juncture, to very briefly survey the impact of Islamic art and science on the West.

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<sup>6</sup> Zeleza, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Translated into English under the title *The History*.