

been for centuries.² Hurgronje's book provides a lens, albeit a tainted one, through which one can peer into the daily life of an era now lost forever.

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BRILL'S CLASSICS IN ISLAM: VOLUME 2:

Franz Rosenthal: *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*

Leiden • Boston: Brill 2007, xiv+355 pp., HC, Eur 69.00/ US\$ 90.00
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He was the most brilliant representative of the heroic and final stage of classical orientalism, notes Dimitri Gutas in his glowing tribute to Franz Rosenthal (1914-2003), whose *Knowledge Triumphant* (first published by Brill in 1970) is the second volume in Brill's new series, "Classics in Islam". "[His] precocity matched the exacting standards of his renowned professors" (xi). Trained in an age "when oriental studies had not developed narrow specialization in the various disciplines", Rosenthal was "a consummate philologist in a number of languages, especially in Arabic and Aramaic" (xiii). Born and educated in Berlin, Rosenthal moved to the United States in 1940, where he first taught at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and then at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1956, he moved to Yale where he remained until his retirement in 1985.

"Significant authors may write many and valuable works," Gutas theorizes in his short introduction, "but as a rule there is one among them in which there is such harmonious blend of profound and original insight, industry, and their own unique voice that it is exceptional. Franz Rosenthal's *Knowledge Triumphant* easily falls into this category, even when one considers the author's remarkable career and prodigious scholarly output (xi)." If *Knowledge Triumphant* is really that significant book, then

2. For details on a recent workshop on Hurgronje's life and works, "Views on Life and Work of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)", held on February 16, 2007 at Leiden, visit <<http://www.ias.nl/portal/index.php?q=event/2007/02/16>>, accessed on November 7, 2007.

there must be something drastically wrong with the very font from which such scholarship emerges. Rosenthal uses 341 pages to “prove” what is known to every elementary student of Islamic thought: “in Islam, the concept of Knowledge enjoyed an importance unparalleled in other civilizations” (334). This is elementary, for even the Muslim testimony of faith is a statement of knowledge; the Qur’ān is replete with references to *‘ilm* (knowledge); every collection of the sayings of the Prophet of Islam contains a *Kitāb al-‘ilm*, that is, a book devoted to merits of *‘ilm* and those who possess it.

Rosenthal does not take this basic precept of Islamic thought as given, but presents this dictum as *his* thesis, spends a great deal of effort and energy in “proving” it, and then, on the very last page of the book, turns it against Islamic civilization. He does this, of course, with finesse. He first asks: “What does it mean for a civilization, and beyond it, for the history of mankind, if ‘knowledge’ is made its central concern?” Then, in order to answer this question, he establishes an equally arbitrary criteria, so typical of orientalist’s approach to religions:

It would seem doubtful whether an answer in terms of good or bad would have any validity whatever. For a given society, “good” is what it itself acknowledges as such, and “bad” is whatever it rejects... Its insistence upon “knowledge” has no doubt made medieval Muslim civilization one of great scholarly and scientific productivity, and through it, Muslim civilization made its most lasting contribution to mankind. “Knowledge” as its center also hardened Muslim civilization and made it impervious to anything that did not fall within its view of what constituted acceptable knowledge. We can see how much can be achieved by the infusion of intellectual and spiritual values in one dominant concept, but the drawbacks of this process also are obvious. (340-41)

Seen from outside orientalism, what is really astounding about orientalist tradition and scholarship that emerges from it is its total malleability, its appalling artificiality, its alienation from any principles higher than itself, its protean inconsistencies, its imposing self-righteousness, and its slavish fidelity to detail at the expense of clarity and profound principles. *Knowledge Triumphant* bristles with all these traits. Rosenthal starts out, in typical orientalist fashion, quantitatively: *‘-l-m*, the root from which the word *‘ilm* (knowledge) is derived, occurs 750 times in the Qur’ān in all its derivatives; this constitutes about one percent of the Qur’ānic vocabulary for the Qur’ān is made up of approximately 78,000 words (20). Such arithmetical acrobatics can be performed by any sophomore today with the

help of a calculator and Fūʾād ʿAbdul Bāqī’s valuable *Muʿjam*.³

The entire work is based on the assumption that the Prophet of Islam fabricated the Qurʾān . “The Prophet was also not concerned with variety in the ideas he preached” (20); “It is evident that the terms which were truly important to the Prophet do indeed occur in the Qurʾān with greater frequency than all others” (21); and

Unless there existed some conception of knowledge in pre-Islamic Arabia beyond our purview, it is impossible to understand why Muḥammad should have given knowledge such a crucial position in his teaching. Thus, we are compelled to look for possible outside influences. To some, this might seem to bring up again the much discussed question of the Prophet’s “originality.” The contention that any search for extraneous models and inspiration diminishes the originality of his accomplishment and is, anyhow, unnecessary is as wrong as it is trite. In fact, if the Qurʾānic use of ʿ-*l-m* cannot be placed in a historical context—and pagan pre-Islamic Arabia by itself does not furnish such a context—, it cannot but appear arbitrary and meaningless, and thus not truly original. True creative originality is found only where there is meaningful continuity. The “originality” of the Prophet’s concern with knowledge will therefore be understood only if a likely source can be discovered. (23)

This is followed by a quest for sources and reasons for this stress on knowledge in the Qurʾān. Since it cannot be found in the Prophet’s native Arabia, Rosenthal offers “a possible and by no means daring assumption that somewhat unorthodox Christian discussions in some form or other trickled down to Muḥammad and, sparking his interest in ‘knowledge’, set in motion the great movement toward ʿilm in Islam” (26). As if this source was not enough, Rosenthal then invents a “hypothetical Jewish Gnosticism as a second possible influence on Muḥammad” and a “pagan Gnosticism” as the third source, only to discard them within one paragraph and reaffirm: “Thus, the Gnostic Christian hypothesis would so far seem to point to the most likely source of inspiration for the Prophet’s concept of knowledge” (28).

Needless to say, this sort of treatment meted out to the Prophet and the Qurʾān in this overbearing work would seem blasphemous to Muslims, but what is important to note is that it does not even stand scrutiny from the secular Academy’s own criteria. For instance, there is the mention of “old traditions” of the Prophet (40), as if there are also some “new traditions”; the book uses a self-coined term “Muslim civilization”—instead of the more meaningful term “Islamic civilization”—in so many different

3. Muḥammad Fūʾād ʿAbdul Bāqī, *al-Muʿjam al-mufahras*. Numerous editions, published in almost every Muslim country.

ways that no fixed meaning can be attributed to it. Furthermore, it uses this term in the singular, which is astounding, for orientalism has spent such a great deal of energy in deconstructing and denying the existence of any normative Islamic tradition that can be said to have existed across time and geographical zones (let alone a whole civilization!), and yet, here we have an undefined “Muslim civilization” supposedly spanning the entire geographical region of the Muslim world and across which knowledge was triumphant! Rosenthal also misconstrues well-established and fundamental Qur’ānic terms such as *Islām* and *Īmān*, which, according to the author “were originally conceived by and large as synonyms” (97), but “which came to be seen eventually as involving primarily the relationship between formal religious practice and religious belief” (97). This confusion prevails despite of the distinct usage of these terms in the Qur’ān⁴ as well as their precise and distinctive usage in many sayings of the Prophet, including well-known and widely accepted authentic *aḥādīth* such as the *ḥadīth Jibrīl*.⁵ Rosenthal could have corrected his erroneous views on this usage through Izutsu’s *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Īmān and Islām*, published five years before the publication of Rosenthal’s work, but our “prodigious scholar” says he has not seen it (97, n.51).

That this scholarship is ideologically driven and politically motivated is obvious. Its reincarnation as “classic” raises serious questions about the directions of the new orientalism.

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4. For instance, *al-Hujarāt*: 14: *The bedouin say: ‘we have attained to faith’, say: ‘you have not attained to faith; you should [rather] say, we have submitted (aslammā), for [true] faith [Īmān] has not entered your hearts’* and many other usages.
5. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Īmān* 1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, *Īmān* 1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, *Īmān* 37; *Mishkāt al-Masābiḥ* 5, 6. For detailed treatment of these concepts, see William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 35-42.