

MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ECONOMIC THOUGHT

Filling the "Great Gap" in European economics

edited by S.M. Ghazanfar

foreword by S. Todd Lowry

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MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ECONOMIC THOUGHT

This book presents a collection of papers on the origins of economic thought discovered in the writings of some prominent Islamic scholars that date from about the five centuries prior to the Latin Scholastics such as St Thomas Aquinas. This period was labelled by the late Joseph Schumpeter as the “Great Gap” in intellectual history—a “gap” that is well embedded in almost all relevant literature. However, it is during this period that Islamic civilization was the most fertile ground for intellectual activity, including socio-economic thought. Further, this scholarship significantly contributed to the European Renaissance Enlightenment

Focusing in particular on the evolution of economic thought in medieval Islamic scholarship, this book is a significant attempt to fill the Schumpeterian “gap”.

S.M.Ghazanfar has been a faculty member at the University of Idaho since 1968, and has received numerous awards for his scholarly contributions. He has published in various areas of economics, and his recent work has been the origins of economic thought in medieval Islamic scholarship. He recently contributed to the television documentary *Islam: Empire of Faith* (2001).

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DEDICATED TO MY LATE FATHER,
S.MAHBUB BAKHSH, WHOSE MEMORY
HAS BEEN SINGULARLY MOST
INSPIRATIONAL THROUGHOUT MY LIFE

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FOREWORD

The Anglo-American intellectual tradition focuses on the north European Atlantic-oriented societies during their cultural development over the last few centuries. This is particularly true of the history of economic thought. The consolidation of nation states and the growth of international commerce in England, France, the Low Countries, and the Hanseatic cities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided the foundations for the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is not surprising, therefore, that the classic paradigm in economic thought, set out in J.A.Schumpeter's erudite *History of Economic Analysis* in 1954, concentrated on the thought of this period with an emphasis on the "Great Gap" between the philosophical contributions of ancient Greece and their rediscovery in the Middle Ages. The interval between the intellectual culture of antiquity and its north European "rebirth" or Renaissance has been labelled the "Dark Ages" from a north European idiosyncratic perspective. Professor S.M.Ghazanfar has formally challenged this mindset, the "Great Gap" thesis that was emphasized by Schumpeter.

The historical facts are undeniable, namely that the culture of antiquity was sustained and developed in the Islamic world during the medieval period; and the intellectual darkness in northern Europe from the seventh to the eleventh century AD was a strictly local phenomenon. The torchbearers of ancient learning during the medieval period were the Muslims, and it was from them that the Renaissance was sparked and the Enlightenment kindled. This has been amply demonstrated in the history of science and mathematics in recent years. For example, in the early twelfth century, the Englishman Adelard of Bath travelled to Muslim Spain and Syria, collecting and translating Arabic manuscripts on mathematics. He is credited with bringing Euclid's *Elements* into the medieval academic world. What has been generally ignored, however, is the character and sophistication of Arabic writings on economic subjects.

The Muslim Scholastics oriented much of their work in terms of theological discourse, as did the Christian schoolmen. The number of these Christian writers that were able to read Arabic is little noted and the parallels between

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Muslim and Christian writings have yet to be definitively drawn. We can observe, however, for illustrative purposes, that the Scholastic doctrine of *Lucrum Cessans* or *A Value Conceded*, used by Christian theologians to justify the charging of a price to cover lost income resulting from the lending of money (opportunity cost), was a Muslim doctrine dating from early medieval times, according to Maxime Rodinson's *Islam and Capitalism* (1978). The influence of Aristotelianism as characterized by Louis Baeck in his *The Mediterranean Tradition in Economic Thought* (1994) was primarily moral. The Muslim Scholastics, preceding the Christian schoolmen, also couched their writings in moral or religious terms. They were, however, primarily dealing with practical issues of the day in the idiom of their culture. Yassine Essid, in his *A Critique of the Origins of Islamic Economic Thought* (1995), has described the administrative orientation of the institution of the *muh̄tasib*, or ombudsman, or market manager and judge. The manuals that provided guidance and instruction for his conduct give us a clear picture of the economy of the Muslim city. This official was in charge of weights and measures as well as standards of fairness and quality that are preconditions for the functioning of markets. Regulations varied with the need to protect the public and the economic health of the city from forces that would limit the fair balance of trade or take advantage of shortages of necessary consumer goods. This tradition was carried into Muslim Spain with the institution of *El Señor del Suq*, or master of the market. The Arabic word for market, *suq*, is preserved in modern Spanish as *zoco* or *zocolo* meaning central market or plaza.

It was an Islamic principle not to set prices for the market, but, by the same token, there was no equivalent to the eighteenth-century belief in natural order emerging from the market. The market regulators could set maximum and minimum prices for goods and had elaborate rules illustrating the need to protect a zone of fair bargaining from a very sophisticated capacity for mercantile fraud. Requiring similar crafts and traders to be aggregated in separate sections of the market promoted competition and comparative shopping. Close supervision of weights and measures and quality also supported the market function. Once when a Tunisian friend came into my office, I was apprised of an old Arabic epithet when he commented, "This place looks like a *suq*!"—a jumbled mess. It is in this context that we must approach Professor Ghazanfar's interest in the economic writings of the Muslim theologians and the parallels with their Christian cohorts. Not only were the Muslim commercial towns of Spain and north Africa more sophisticated and better managed than the nascent towns of eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe, excepting Italy, but the European Scholastics and mathematicians looked to the Muslim world for their intellectual progress, as did the merchants. The Greek classics, particularly Aristotle's work, were accessible through translations from the Arabic. The strength of the commercial culture of the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages has been somewhat ignored and brushed aside by the idiosyncratic nationalism of the Atlantic states. We have forgotten the trade languages. *Lingua Franca* in the

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eastern Mediterranean and *Saber* in the western Mediterranean, and the academic contacts between Cordoba and Paris. When, in the thirteenth century, the English sought to protect their small farmers from cattle theft and untrustworthy continental cattle buyers, they established special market towns with specific market days. The market rules prohibited *forestalling*, *engrossing* and *regrating*. Forestalling was buying from a farmer en route to the market with cajoling stories of collapsed prices, etc. It also meant that sales had to take place in the open market to be legal. In this way stolen cattle could be identified. It is hardly an accident that these three restrictions existed in the Muslim market rules with similar definitions (Essid, 155–7). As the “less developed” countries—France, the Netherlands and England—took up an active commercial life, it makes sense for us to look at their intellectual and practical evolution as an extension of the Mediterranean experience.

The eminent analyst of medieval Scholasticism, Odd Langholm, in his recent book *The Legacy of Scholasticism in Economic Thought* (1998), brings out the institutional practicalities of Scholastic policy and theory. This same perspective on the relation between Muslim and Christian Scholasticism is in order and is a badly needed step toward a proper understanding of the influence of the superior Muslim scientific and philosophical erudition of medieval times. Not only can it be documented that many scientists and theologians in the medieval period read Arabic, it is strange that St Thomas Aquinas’ embrace of Aristotelianism has seldom been correlated with a familiarity with Muslim academic erudition, since Aristotle’s works were being drawn from Muslim intermediaries. Aquinas was raised in Naples, in the shadow of the then cultural sophistication of the Court of Frederick II in Sicily. Professor Ghazanfar has the study of Aquinas’ Arabic sources.

Furthermore, it is well known that the work of Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina) were dominant influences in the School of Paris. It is, therefore, high time for extensive study of the Muslim literature of the time as the basis for a broader perspective on our theoretical heritage and the history of our economic customs and practices. It is seldom noted that our word *cheque* for a financial instrument comes from an Arabic term, and that our word *magazine* for storage room or literary collection comes from the Arabic word for warehouse.

S.Todd Lowry
Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia, June 2002

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I wish to extend my appreciation and thanks to several people whose contributions and assistance made this volume possible.

Most importantly, I acknowledge, with gratitude, the contributions of Dr Abdul Azim Islahi of the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India, formerly of the King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was during my 1983–6 affiliation with the King Abdulaziz University when Dr Islahi and I began our collaboration on several research ventures. As a junior colleague and an economist, with impeccable fluency in the Arabic language, he was able to meaningfully translate and assist in interpreting much of the Arabic-language literature that formed the main source of our three jointly authored papers, reproduced in the present volume. I salute Dr Islahi for his contributions and his assistance. Relatedly, I give thanks to Dr M. Nejatullah Siddiqi, also formerly of the King Abdulaziz University, presently residing in California, for his collaborative lead in the Abu Yusuf paper. Furthermore, Dr Hamid Hosseini of King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, deserves appreciation for allowing two of his published papers to be included in this volume.

My deep thanks also to Dr S. Todd Lowry, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, and about the most prominent contemporary scholar of early economic thought. I vividly remember his enthusiasm when, as a discussant, he encountered my original paper on the “gap” thesis, presented at the 1988 History of Economics Society conference in Toronto, Canada. Ever since, he has been a close friend, a mentor, and, given his own familiarity with the early Islamic scholarship, an inspiration in several of my research efforts. Thus it was natural that I should ask him to write a foreword for the present volume; he kindly agreed to do so. I am grateful, Todd.

I wish to acknowledge, with thanks, the research support provided by the University of Idaho's College of Business and Economics during several summers. Without this support, some of the papers in this volume would perhaps not have become reality. That support indeed not only provided encouragement but also reflected endorsement for my efforts in pursuing relatively non-mainstream research.

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And, last but not the least, my deep gratitude to my wife, Rukhsana, for her love and encouragement in helping me to finalize this project.

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INTRODUCTION

S.M. Ghazanfar

While the 9/11 apocalyptic nightmare and subsequent events have generated an environment in which academic discussions of the “civilizational clash” *vis-à-vis* the West and the Islamic world have surfaced to the common consciousness, this very phenomenon also suggests the intense need for a dialogue across cultures and nations. That indeed was the spirit behind the 1998 United Nations resolution which declared 2001 as the “Year of Civilizational Dialogue”. While the present volume focuses primarily on economic thought in the writings of several medieval Islamic scholars, it also documents the multi-dimensional linkages and influences, extending over several medieval centuries, between the then vibrant Islamic civilization and the evolving Latin-European culture. In that sense, this book may make some modest contribution toward cultivating the spirit of dialogue and appreciation of inexorable historic connections between the two worlds whose origins lie in the same crucible.

The book is a single-volume collection of papers, published during recent years in various national and international journals, on the subject of the origins of economic thought among medieval Islamic Scholastics; this is not a book about Islamic economics, however. A key stimulus for these papers emanates from a blind spot that has long prevailed in the relevant literature and which was further strengthened and perpetuated by the late Joseph A. Schumpeter. In his classic *History of Economic Analysis* (1954), Schumpeter propounded the “Great Gap” thesis, namely that the several centuries between the Greeks and the Latin Scholastics (particularly St Thomas Aquinas, 1225–74) were simply “blank” centuries (Schumpeter, 74). During this period, argued Schumpeter, nothing of relevance to economics was written anywhere (nor was anything written, it would seem, in any other discipline) (Schumpeter, 52). Such a claim is patently untenable, as argued in Chapter 1 of this volume.¹

Unfortunately, however, the “gap” tradition is well entrenched in almost all relevant literature—indeed, in almost all literary history. The literature on economic ideas, often presented as “universal”, “comprehensive” and “international in scope”, almost invariably begins with Aristotle (384–

322BC), then leaps to St Thomas Aquinas and beyond, but is restricted to European/North American scholarship. Despite his insistence on “intellectual continuity” and “filiation of ideas”, Schumpeter chose to disregard the contributions from other civilizations and cultures, in particular the contributions of medieval Islamic writers. Almost precisely during this period, the Islamic civilization represented about the most fertile environment of intellectual activity in almost all areas of then known endeavours, including socio-economic thought. With the background of the rediscovered Greek intellectual reservoir, numerous Islamic scholars developed concepts and notions on various economic topics, among other things, which are remarkably similar, though less elegantly couched, to those found in the writings of subsequent European scholars as well as in the contemporary literature; some Islamic sages even wrote separate treatises specifically devoted to economic/commercial issues. Further, almost all of this intellectual output was transferred *en masse*, through various sources and over several centuries, to early Latin-Europe. And this knowledge transfer facilitated the twelfth-century Renaissance, with its emphasis on science and philosophy, and laid the foundations for “the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and eventually the rise of modern science in the seventeenth” (Nebelsick, 9). Indeed, this was the period when “Islam was at one and the same time the enemy and the great source of higher material and intellectual culture” (Watt 1965, 180).

While the blind spot of the Schumpeterian literature “gap” persists in much of the mainstream literature, there is evidence of some recent accommodative gestures. The 1994 History of Economics Society conference commemorated the 50th anniversary of Schumpeter’s classic, and it included sessions on the “gap” thesis (the lead paper, “Post-Greek/pre-Renaissance economic thought”, is included in the present volume). Subsequently, several papers from this conference were published in an edited volume, and in referring to the “gap” controversy, the editor says:

of all Schumpeter’s alleged errors in the HEA, the one that seems to have stirred up the most debate among historians is Schumpeter’s remark about the alleged “Great Gap” in the flow of analytic discussions between the ninth and fourteenth centuries.

(Moss 1996b, 5)

And he further points out:

Thanks to the research presented...and to a variety of important other writings and papers...as this century ends, historians can celebrate some success in responding to Schumpeter’s implicit challenge. (The textbook literature in the history of economics has yet to take adequate notice of this literature, however.)

(*ibid.*, 7)

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It is gratifying to note that some textbook literature is beginning to be a bit inclusive. The most notable is the fourth edition of the Landreth-Colander text which, as part of pre-classical economic thought, includes a section on Arab-Islamic thought and provides some references for the interested reader (see Landreth and Colander, 32–4). Another is the sixth edition of the Ingrid Rima text, which makes a brief reference to Islamic scholarship, though somewhat tentatively (Rima, 10).

Thus the present volume aspires to fill the “Great Gap” that unfortunately is part of the otherwise monumental legacy of the late Joseph Schumpeter. Altogether, the volume includes fifteen papers (including two brief papers, one being a commentary on the 1990 Al-Ghazali paper and the other a rejoinder) -all except one previously published. Given the range of topics covered, it seems appropriate to present the papers in an approximate chronological sequence. Thus each paper is identified and briefly described below.

Chapter 1, “Scholastic economics and Arab scholars: the ‘Great Gap’ thesis reconsidered” (published 1991), formally challenges the Schumpeterian thesis, argues for continuity and inclusiveness in literary history, and thus establishes the tone for subsequent papers.

Chapter 2, “Economic thought of an Arab Scholastic: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, (1058–1111AD)” (published 1990), presents several aspects of Al-Ghazali’s economic thought—voluntary-exchange market economy, ethics of market behaviour, private ownership, hierarchy of production activities (including specialization and division of labour), evolution of money, regional trade, role of the state, and public finances

Chapter 3 is “Economic thought and religious thought: a comment on Ghazanfar and Islahi” (published 1995). The comment is a critique of the 1990 Al-Ghazali paper, and the author argues that Ghazali’s economics is essentially religious thought and nothing more.

Chapter 4 is “A rejoinder to ‘Economic thought and religious thought’” (published 1995). This response argues that Ghazali’s economics is no more “religious” than that of some Latin-European Scholastics, most notably St Thomas Aquinas, and entirely consistent with the theological-philosophical debates of the age.

Chapter 5, “Explorations in medieval Arab-Islamic thought: some aspects of Ibn Taimiyah’s economics” (published 1992), presents several aspects of Ibn Taimiyah’s economics—operations of the free market, price determination through demand and supply, administration of markets through *hisbah*, or ombudsmen, property rights, money and its functions, and the promotion of socio-economic justice through the state.

Chapter 6 is “History of economic thought: the Schumpeterian ‘Great Gap’, the ‘lost’ Arab-Islamic legacy, and the literature gap” (published 1995). The main focus of the paper is to provide evidence, based on a survey of several textbooks, of the literature gap in the mainstream literature on economic thought.

Chapter 7, “Understanding the market mechanism before Adam Smith: economic thought in medieval Islam” (published 1995), argues that the Islamic scholars developed a sophisticated view of the markets, given a mercantile-commercial society; the discussion extends to Dimishqi and the Persian scholar Ibn Iskandar.

Chapter 8, “The inaccuracy of the Schumpeterian ‘Great Gap’ thesis: economic thought in medieval Iran (Persia)” (published 1996), extends the “gap” critique further and presents a survey of the economic thought of several Iranian (Persian) Islamic scholars during the “gap” period—Kai Kavus, Nezam-al-Mulk, Berun, Farabi, Tusi, Assad Davani, and others.

Chapter 9, “Explorations in medieval Arab-Islamic economic thought: some aspects of Ibn Qayyim’s economics” (published 1997), presents Ibn Qayyim’s views on economic pursuits under Islam, views on affluence and poverty, the economic significance of Zakah (mandatory charity), the prohibition of usury, public sector intervention, etc.

Chapter 10, “Medieval Islamic socio-economic thought: links with Greek and Latin-European scholarship” (published 1997), presents a synopsis of the Greek intellectual heritage of the Islamic scholars upon which the latter developed their own synthesis (that included socio-economic thought), followed by a brief survey of the economic thought of several Islamic scholars, as well as of the links with the Latin-European intellectual evolution.

Chapter 11, “Post-Greek/pre-Renaissance economic thought: contributions of Arab-Islamic Scholastics during the ‘Great Gap’ centuries” (published 1998), presents some key aspects of the economics of several Islamic scholars (Abu Yusuf, Alberuni, Al-Ghazali, Tusi) and documents the various sources of transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to medieval Latin-Europe.

Chapter 12, “Economic thought of Al-Ghazali and St Thomas Aquinas: some comparative parallels and linkages” (published 2000), identifies several parallels and similarities between the major economic ideas of these two Scholastics, including:

- 1 cheating, fraud, and prices (including the notion of “just” price),
- 2 prohibition of usury,
- 3 value and prices,
- 4 limits on profits,
- 5 views on private property,
- 6 hoarding; and
- 7 counterfeiting and currency debasement.

Also discussed is the direct/indirect influence of the work of Islamic scholars (especially Al-Ghazali) on St Thomas Aquinas.

Chapter 13, “Early medieval Islamic economic thought: Abu Yousuf’s economics of public finance” (published 2001), discusses several key public finance issues in an exchange-economy environment, e.g. “canons of taxation”

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(similar to Adam Smith), tax incentives, proportional *vs.* fixed-amount tax on land, sharing of public spending on “benefits-divisible” projects, and so forth.

Chapter 14, “Public-sector economics in medieval economic thought: contributions of selected Arab-Islamic scholars” (published 2001), presents a focused survey of the specific public finance issues discussed by three Islamic scholars: Abu Yousuf, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Taimiyah.

Chapter 15 is “Medieval social thought and European Renaissance: The Influence of selected Arab-Islamic Scholastics” (presented 2001). This capstone paper begins with a reference to the UN-declared “Year of Civilization Dialogue”(2001), then briefly surveys the contributions of key Islamic scholars (Al-Kindi, Al-Razi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd) followed by some discussion of the specific influence of Ibn Rushd (“the Islamic Aristotle”; “the landmark of reason”) that eventually challenged the St Thomas synthesis (*Summa Theologica*) in Latin-Europe.

Before concluding this introduction, some caveats are in order. First, since the chapters were originally published independently of each other, there is often reference to the “gap” thesis, as well as mention of some other key points. However, as presented in this collected volume, such references will obviously appear repetitive. With due apologies, the editor requests the reader’s tolerance and forbearance. Further, the chapters interchangeably use terms such as “Arab” scholars, “Arab-Islamic” scholars, or simply “Islamic/Muslim” scholars. While in some sense the distinctions may be appropriate, our reference throughout is to the Islamic (or Muslim) scholars, whether Arab, Iranian or Persian, who wrote their discourses in the early Islamic civilization. And, finally, it is to be noted as well that while terms such as “capitalism”, “market economy”, “price system”, and “voluntary-exchange economy” are of rather recent origin, the assumptions underlying the economic discussions of the medieval Islamic scholars were essentially the same as those of a contemporary market economy, albeit with an administrative role for the state in order to pursue the goal of common good. Parenthetically, also to be noted is the meaning of the word “medieval”. While the word (sometimes used synonymously with “Middle Ages”) refers to the European Dark Ages, covering approximately the period from around the eighth to the fourteenth century, this referent hardly suits the Islamic civilization of that time, often identified as the “Golden Age” of Islam. However, we have followed the usual practice, and the word “medieval” is used as referring to its common meaning.

Note

- 1 To be sure, this “gap” had been pointed out in an Urdu-language article published in India in 1964; see Siddiqi (1964).

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