

SELJUQS CULTURAL HISTORY – Philosophy

Overview

As the Turkic peoples of Central Asia converted to Islam, they both adopted and became patrons of the culture of the Islamic world expressed in Arabic and, increasingly, in Persian. In some cases, such as the Qarakhanids, conversion to Islam involved not just the ruling clan, but the majority of that state's inhabitants. As a result, the establishment of religious institutions and providing religious instruction to the people were priorities. While it is clear that the Qarakhanids took an interest in some elements of Islamic culture, such as architecture and literature, and even made their own contributions to it, philosophy was not a subject that captured the imagination of the Qarakhanids.

The series of conquests in the 11th century that stretched from Khorasan to Anatolia left the Seljuqs masters of regions like Iran and Iraq that had long been centers of Islamic culture as well as lands like Anatolia where the Seljuqs were the first Muslim rulers and Islamic culture was new. While the Seljuqs were relatively new to Islam and the culture of the Islamic world, they quickly took on the duties expected of a Muslim sovereign, and among these was patronage of culture. Seljuq sultans filled their courts with poets, religious scholars and scholars whose interests included philosophy. Although the Seljuqs themselves do not seem to have been involved in philosophical speculation and writing, the Great Seljuqs ruled over lands that produced some of the most important figures in Islamic philosophy. In the case of the Sultanate of Rum where most of the population was still non-Muslim and Islamic culture was only beginning to be introduced, the sultans' courts still managed to attract some of the most influential thinkers of the time. However, the philosophers who are known to have spent at least part of their lives studying and/or teaching in both states are figures whose works are linked to both philosophy and religion.

Great Seljuqs

Three major thinkers exemplify the diversity of intellectual speculation that flourished in the Great Seljuq Empire: Omar Khayyam (عمر خیام), Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (أبو حامد الغزالي), and 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani (عين القضات همداني). Each was an influential thinker in his own way, and each was connected in some way to the Great Seljuq court.

The first, Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), was from Nishapur, the city which served as the first Great Seljuq capital. Although primarily known in the west for his collection of poems, the *Ruba'iyat*, in his own time Khayyam was a polymath renowned as a mathematician, astronomer, philosopher and religious scholar, and it was his abilities in the first two fields that brought him into contact with the Great Seljuqs. In 1074-75 the Grand Vizier Nizam al-Mulk invited Khayyam to meet Sultan Malik Shah I in Marv. Shortly afterwards Khayyam was made the head of a group of scholars who were tasked with establishing an observatory in Isfahan in order to make the astronomical observations necessary for them to revise the Persian calendar. This project was carried out between 1076 – 1079 and resulted in the Jalali calendar which was adopted in 1079.

After the deaths of both Nizam al-Mulk, and Sultan Malik Shah I in 1092, Khayyam's popularity in the court declined and he left to perform the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Eventually, Khayyam returned to Nishapur, but shortly afterwards was invited by Sultan Sanjar (r. 1118-1153) to come to Marv and serve as the court astrologer. Khayyam accepted and served for some years until health problems led to his resignation and return to Nishapur where he lived until his death in 1131 at the age of 83.

The next major thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (c.1058-1111), was known primarily as a religious scholar, and was referred to as the *hujjat al-islam* (حجة الإسلام, "proof of Islam" or "authority on Islam") by his contemporaries, but he also wrote philosophical works which critiqued the teachings of Aristotle. He came to the notice of the Grand Vizier Nizam al-Mulk and was invited to join his court in 1085, during the reign of Sultan Malik Shah I. Nizam al-Mulk was clearly impressed with al-Ghazzali's learning because in 1091 he appointed al-Ghazzali to teach in the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad, a highly

prestigious position. Despite his success as a teacher there, in 1095, as a result of a deep spiritual crisis al-Ghazzali resigned his position, ostensibly to perform the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. He disposed of much of his property, spent some time in Damascus and Jerusalem, visited to holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1096, and returned to his hometown of Tus. There, he spent the next several years in semi-reclusion, but continued to write and teach in an unofficial capacity.

In 1106, al-Ghazzali was once again brought into the service of the Great Seljuqs when the vizier of the Seljuq ruler of Khorasan, Ahmad Sanjar (later Sultan Sanjar, r.1118-1157), persuaded al-Ghazzali to teach in the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Nishapur. However, his stay in Nishapur did not last long, and al-Ghazzali returned to Tus where he died in December 1111.

The careers of both Omar Khayyam and Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali show the on-again off-again relationship that many scholars, writers and artists had with the ruling Seljuq elite. However, these two men were able to leave their positions within the Seljuq administration before the negative consequences of court rivalries and jealousies became too severe. However, this would not be the case with the next thinker who put himself in opposition to Seljuq rule.

'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani (also: 'Ayn/'Ain al-Quzat Hamadani) was born in the western Iranian city of Hamedan in 1098. He studied the works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali and was a friend and student of his brother, Ahmad Ghazzali. A prolific writer and original thinker, 'Ayn al-Qudat defended aspects of Aristotelian philosophy as presented by Ibn Sina against the criticisms of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, but combined these with the emerging doctrines of Sufism. While his philosophical and religious writings earned him staunch supporters, 'Ayn al-Qudat's harsh criticism of contemporary religious scholars and Seljuq rule gained him numerous enemies. Eventually, despite some supporters in the Seljuq administration, 'Ayn al-Qudat was caught up in court rivalries and, under circumstances that are not entirely clear, sentenced to death and executed in 1131. His tomb in Hamedan attracted numerous visitors until it was destroyed at some point in the Safavid era.

Readings

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein and Leaman, Oliver (eds.). *History of Islamic Philosophy*. London, 1996.

Safi, Omid. *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*. Chapel Hill, NC, 2006.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did philosophers who served in the Great Seljuq administration often find their situations difficult?

Rum Seljuqs

Unlike the Great Seljuqs, the Seljuqs of Rum did not employ any well-known philosophers in any official position. However, scholars and philosophers were welcomed by the Seljuqs of Rum and were free to stay and teach as they wished. Two well-known thinkers in particular spent time studying and/or teaching in the Sultanate of Rum: Shihab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi (بشهاب الدين بن حبش السهروردي) and Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (محيي الدين ابن عربي). In addition, the Sultanate of Rum would produce one influential philosopher and religious thinker, Sadr al-Din Qunawi (صدر الدين قونوي).

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (also Shihab ad-Din Sohrevardi, 1154-1191) was a Persian thinker and writer from the town of Sohrevard in northwestern Iran. After studying in nearby Maragheh and Isfahan, Suhrawardi traveled in the Sultanate of Rum for several years studying with teachers and Sufi masters such as Fakhr al-Din al-Mardini, and seeking patrons. In 1183 he settled in Aleppo where he became a well-known teacher and wrote his most famous work, *The Philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-Ishraq, حكمة الإشراف)*, completed in 1186. Suhrawardi's learning, disdainful attitude towards local scholars, and unorthodox ideas gained him a number of enemies who worked for his downfall. Eventually, he was charged with heresy and executed.

While Suhrawardi's links to the Sultanate of Rum were unofficial and mostly undocumented, the second philosopher and religious scholar whose name is linked with Rum, Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), visited several times left a number of influential students. Originally from Spain, and referred to as "the greatest sheikh" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*, الشيخ الأكبر) on the basis of his teachings, Ibn 'Arabi left Spain in

1200 to perform the *hajj*. He reached Mecca in 1202, and for the next two years divided his time between Mecca and Medina. In 1204 he traveled to Jerusalem, Baghdad and Mosul, and it was during these travels that he met an Iranian, Majd al-Din Ishaq bin Yusuf al-Rumi (مجد الدين إسحاق بن يوسف الرومي), from Malatya with connections to the Seljuq court in Konya, and the father of Sadr al-Din Qunawi would become one of Ibn 'Arabi's most important disciples. Majd al-Din took Ibn 'Arabi to Konya in 1205, but Ibn Arabi left later in the year. He would return to the Sultanate of Rum possibly in 1212, and certainly in 1216, when he came to first Sivas and then Malatya. Ibn 'Arabi remained in Malatya until some point between 1218-1221, when he left for Damascus where he would spend the rest of his life.

During Ibn 'Arabi's extended stay in Malatya he appears to have been on very good terms with Sultan Kaykavus I (r. 1211-1220), and to have married his friend Majd al-Din's widow, becoming Sadr al-Din's stepfather in the process. Sadr al-Din seems to have remained with Ibn 'Arabi until 1220, when he was entrusted the boy and his education to a close friend, Sheikh Awhad al-Din Kirmani. After Ibn 'Arabi's death in 1240, Sadr al-Din became the most prominent teacher and interpreter of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and composed a number of original works; his commentary on the Qur'an *I'jaz al-Bayan fi Tafsir Umm al-Qur'an* (اعجاز البيان في تفسير أم القرآن) is generally regarded as his most important work. However, Sadr al-Din's larger significance to the development of Islamic philosophy and religious thought is that by writing Persian commentaries and discussions of Ibn 'Arabi's Arabic works he and his students transmitted the ideas of Ibn 'Arabi to the eastern Islamic lands where Persian was far more widely understood than Arabic. As a result, Ibn 'Arabi's teachings are more widely spread than almost any other thinker from the Islamic west who wrote in Arabic.

Readings

Addas, Claude. *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabi*. The Islamic Texts Society, 1993.

Cahen, Claude. *The Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rum: Eleventh to Fourteenth Century*. Harlow, 2001.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein and Leaman, Oliver (eds.). *History of Islamic Philosophy*. London, 1996.

Rice, Tamara Talbot. *The Seljuks in Asia Minor*. New York, 1966.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did non-conventional thinkers and teachers find welcome in the Sultanate of Rum?
2. What is the historical significance of Ibn 'Arabi's brief stay in the Sultanate of Rum for the history of Islamic philosophy and Sufism?