Book Review

Bahman Zakipour. *Izutsu Toshihiko no hikaku tetsugaku: shinteki na mono to shakaiteki na mono no arasoi* ("Toshihiko Izutsu's Comparative Philosophy: A Conflict between the Social and the Divine").[1] Tokyo: Chisen Shokan, 2019. 307 + xxiv pp. ISBN 9784862852915. 5300 yen.

In 1979, in the midst of the Iranian Revolution, the polymath comparative philosopher Izutsu Toshihiko (1914–1993) fled his post at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy and returned to his native Japan. Reinstalled to a chair at his alma mater, Keio University, he made a final turn from Islamic philosophy towards Japan's own philosophical tradition. In this final and most mature articulation of Izutsu's thought, language is produced in Buddhist terms by "linguistic storehouse consciousness" (*gengo-arayashiki*), and therefore the meanings of language are all temporary and contingent, just like the states of existence and mind produced by dependent arising.

Izutsu's mature work is regarded in Japan as a particularly excellent local articulation of the *philosophia perennis*, the belief in an essential unity among the world's wisdom traditions, and his books remain popular among philosophically minded Japanese today. Izutsu provides readers with a thrillingly vast spatial and temporal definition for the "East," imagining the Spain of Ibn ʿArabi and the Greece of Plato as manifestations of an ultimately superhistorical Orient, equivalent with the source of perennial wisdom described in Islamic philosophy. From Izutsu, Japanese readers can perceive a basis for discovering a common "Eastern" wisdom which Japan might share with other non-Western countries.

Izutsu Toshihiko no hikaku tetsugaku is the doctoral dissertation of Bahman Zakipour, an Iranian philosopher based in Tokyo. Interpreting Izutsu's work as a specific approach to comparative philosophy, it is divided into three parts:

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1. With the exception of this English title, which is given on the book's cover page, all quotations in this review were translated by the reviewer.

"The Essence and Consequences of Comparative Philosophy," "The Significance of Izutsu's Comparative Philosophy: Concerning the Divine," and "A Conflict Between the Social and Divine: In Search of the Superhistorical Tradition." Zakipour analyzes Izutsu's intent and details some of his ideas as they pertain to comparative philosophy and mystical experience, but he also reaches the conclusion that Izutsu was not able to accomplish everything he set out to do, and in the course of his analysis of the contradictions contained within Izutsu's thought, he turns our attention from the finger pointing at the moon to the intent of the one pointing the finger. Zakipour interrogates our academic and personal motivations for doing comparative philosophy and complicates the good-natured desire for sympathy with "the East" in a world of power politics.

Izutsu Toshihiko no hikaku tetsugaku is neither a deconstructive nor a modernist critique. Part of the book, which I will abbreviate here, attempts to simply outline Izutsu's comparative philosophy, demonstrating his good grasp of Islamic philosophical terms, but this is mixed with accounts of Izutsu's meetings with Iranians and discussions of the limitations of his work. Although a brief English-language synopsis in the back of the book describes it as grounded in Foucauldian analysis (304), the reader will be hard-pressed to find more than a single reference to Foucault within its two hundred and seventy pages. The real thesis of the book, I think, is to propose an inconsistency between Izutsu's proclamation of the need for comparative philosophy to obtain "mutual understanding between nations" and his careful avoidance of opportunities to enter into dialogue with revolutionary Iranian thought. I believe Zakipour has uncovered an important issue with Izutsu's invocation of the specific mystical language of Shia Islam as the basis for a common "Eastern" mysticism. Zakipour argues that in its reduction to a subjective, individual phenomenon, mystical experience under Izutsu's scheme is "re-religionized" and recaptured for modern secularism.

Introducing the theme of comparative philosophy and values, Zakipour contrasts Samuel Huntington's 1998 depiction of philosophical difference as a "clash of civilizations," which was for a time predominant in the United States,

with Iranian Prime Minister Moḥammad Khātamī's simultaneous call for a "dialogue of civilizations," which won favor at the United Nations. For historical context, he points to the political meaning and social power of comparative philosophy among premodern Muslims, from Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (973–1048)'s praise of Indian philosophy written directly in response to his patron's destruction of Hindu temples, to the Mughal prince Dārā Shikōh (1615–1659), whose inclusive view of Hindu philosophy lost out to the destructive tactics of his brother Aurangzeb.[2] Zakipour suggests that regardless of historical era, the project of demonstrating an esoteric unity of differing worldviews through comparative philosophy is not a purely metaphysical determination made in a vacuum, but stands in direct conflict with powerful political interests.

Izutsu was employed for four years at public expense in the Shah's Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and in his work, he described the urgent need for "mutual understanding" between nations, ideally based in the *philosophia perennis* (107). Following the Iranian Revolution, Izutsu's work on Islam remained beloved among Iranians. However, he always found reasons to avoid direct engagement with revolutionary Iran. Around 1984, then-President Khāmene'ī (now Supreme Leader) invited him back to Iran to speak, but Izutsu pleaded illness (167). At another point in the 1980s, the Iranian ambassador to Japan urged Izutsu several times to give a speech at the embassy, at one point even offering to visit him in his home, but Izutsu refused every time, claiming he was too busy (168).

In a 1984 publication, Izutsu offered a theological perspective on the Iranian Revolution, asserting with all the firmness of a believer that the occultation of the twelfth imam in Shia Islam precludes divine authorization for any sort of secular government. He conceded that Iran is "groping for a way by which they can live in the current situation of international upheaval" (260), but this reviewer perceives some connection between his theological objection and his

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2. Some other examples of premodern Persian comparative philosophy can be found in Shankar Nair's *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia* (California: University of California Press, 2020).

real-life hesitance to engage with representatives of post-revolutionary Iran. If Izutsu had spoken at the Iranian embassy or engaged in public dialogue with Iranian Muslims as he was doing with many Japanese intellectuals, his critique would have been the opening of a lengthy historical and theological discussion, which he avoided. We might explain this in one of three ways: 1) his theological objection concealed pragmatic objections to the nation's new government, 2) it concealed a more deeply hypocritical distaste for Islamic practice generally, or 3) Izutsu respected Islamic practice from a distance but was uncomfortable with directly encountering evangelists or discussing political implementation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the final possibility is the most likely.

Izutsu told his student, Mehdi Mohaghegh, that a chance meeting with a Shia *ulama* group was the first "spiritual meeting" he had ever experienced. But despite his fascination with the *ulama*, he refused to seek out such meetings with contemporary Shia philosophers in Tehran. Henry Corbin held weekly meetings in the Velenjak district with an Iranian all-star philosophical circle that included Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Allāma Tabataba'i, Dariush Shayegan, and Morteza Motahharī. In a Farsi publication, Nasr has described this Velenjak circle as the greatest comparative discussion between Islamic and Western philosophy that had ever taken place since the days of Ibn Rushd. Nasr told Zakipour that he implored Izutsu countless times to participate in this circle, but Izutsu always refused, without citing any specific reason (221). Therefore, we see that Izutsu's refusal to dialogue directly with Shia intellectuals began before 1979.

In this we can see an enigma emerge in Izutsu's project. Izutsu tried to ground his "Eastern" philosophical outlook in Islamic or specifically Shia Muslim philosophy, yet he rejected every opportunity to hear directly from practicing Muslims about how philosophy related to their mental and bodily practices and their general world outlook. Borrowing a phrase from the Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm (1934–2016), Zakipour describes Izutsu's outlook as "reverse Orientalism": the mirror image of Orientalism, produced in the same way through

essentializing of the East-West distinction. For Izutsu, rather than the East losing its agency through decadence and degeneracy, it is precisely because "the East" is too pure, the source of wisdom and light, that it cannot be permitted to engage in political self-representation. Izutsu did not want to contemplate Iranian Muslims as living people searching for a way to adapt their "Eastern" beliefs and practices to the "secularizing" modern language of the Westphalian nation-state.

To understand how Izutsu idealized an "Eastern" purity and situated it against academic philosophy, Zakipour contrasts his methodology with that of Paul Masson-Oursel (1882–1956), progenitor of the modern discipline of comparative philosophy. While also writing from a place of sympathy, Masson-Oursel emphasized rigorous historical discipline, grounded in an awareness that philosophical writing is historically and culturally contingent (53). Drawing on Corbin's objections to Masson-Oursel, Izutsu eventually adopted a "metahistorical" stance, where a certain metaphysical outlook is needed to evaluate philosophical shifts over time.

Zakipour indicates that several dangers arise from this stance. Without knowledge of the multivocal histories of a tradition and the foreign languages in which its wisdom is expressed, concepts may be dislodged from their historical context and essentialized as ahistorical, "perennial" truths. Meanwhile, from a political perspective, such a stance may be used to construct idealized national identities, and to center specific worldviews at the expense of worldviews deemed peripheral. In short, because Izutsu's stance is super-historical, he lacks the grounds to evaluate the sociopolitical contingency of philosophical change. Zakipour concludes:

> For Izutsu and his collaborators, the encounter between Western and non-Western philosophies invites the great political risk of undermining spiritual foundations through the secularization of the world. Therefore, the responsibility and duty of comparative philosophy is to restore mankind's lost spirituality and discover a way of overcoming secularism. In other words, they believed that comparative philosophies and ideas could overcome the crisis of secularism by comparing and re-reading the concepts of spiritual tides in history.

> The transcendence found in superhistoricality should be understood in this context. While this transcendence is deemed sacred, we will see presently that it is not the [same type of] sanctity which has been socially constructed as religions from premodern times. The problem, however, is that within this project for overcoming secularism, this new sacred inevitably becomes re-religionized, that is, recaptured by the system. This is nothing more than the reification that Corbin, Izutsu, and their collaborators tried to avoid (61).

Izutsu, following Corbin, developed his personal variety of comparative philosophy "beneath a normative field including divine wisdom, mysticism, religious experience, mythology, poetry, and morality" (66). Corbin, especially, insisted that the substitution of social reality for divine reality produced secularism and nihilism. For Corbin, comparative philosophy provides a way to escape from social constructionism and overcome the strictures of secular historiography. While Izutsu did not repeat such harsh critiques of modernity, he eventually adopted Corbin's reasoning that the "Eastern" philosophy that serves as the object of comparative study is only a symbol by which one might access Islamic philosophy's superhistorical, esoteric East (*mashriq*)—the direction from which light emerges. By this reasoning, not only was Izutsu able to include ancient Greece and medieval Spain within his definition of "the East," but philosophy itself became a "diachronic East," a superhistorical reality standing outside of contingent, temporal facts (77).

What exactly is the function of the diachronical and spiritual East? Zakipour hones in on abstractions in Izutsu's late work that are closely linked to his expansive definition of the East. Human consciousness starts out in what Izutsu calls *B*-territory, guided only to perceive differentiation. The mystical experience, which Izutsu identifies with the Arabic *fanā*, awakens the consciousness to undifferentiated reality, the "light of lights" (*nur al-anwār*) or in Izutsu's terminology *A*-territory. However, original reality is completely beyond differentiated language. In the subsequent transition, identified as *baqā'* or the Sufi state of enlightened existence, those with knowledge of reality try to use language to express it to the world. This Izutsu describes as *M*-territory,

a medial state in between the undifferentiated Real and the dependently arisen worlds of essences and forms (157).

While this seems like a straightforward presentation of Islamic mysticism, Zakipour takes issue with how Izutsu makes mystical experience the only basis of any legitimate knowledge:

> Certainly, Izutsu and Corbin's objective is to overcome the problems and crises of the present world (*B*-territory). However, their method of resolving this is to search for the unmanifest territory (*M*-territory). *M*-territory is something obtained through mystical experience, and only the mystic or the ascetic can envision phenomena and "understand" (or "interpret"). In other words, it seems the general public will never be able to envision and "understand." Can the "understanding" of *M*-territory never be more than personal and subjective? ... Because sociopolitical problems and crises are attached to *B*-territory, does that mean their resolution must be sought within *B*-territory? ... When [Izutsu and Corbin] argue for superhistoricity and superregionality, taking infinitude for granted, they take us beyond the constraints of specific societies, times, and politics. They have no language to talk about the appearance of an overturned politicality (161–2).

For me, Zakipour's critique hits the mark not because I know that it perfectly coincides with Izutsu's large body of work, but because it matches perfectly with the sociological mystery that Zakipour uncovered through interviews with various participants of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, summarized above. Izutsu constructed a type of esoteric knowledge which can be hardly spoken of except in reference to itself, so he was necessarily wary of dialogue with others who claimed both understanding of esoteric knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge as a solution for this-worldly problems. As Zakipour concludes:

> For Izutsu, religious ideas belong to the territory of creative imagination, and those ideas cannot be reduced to the sociopolitical phase. If religious ideas were reduced to the sociopolitical phase, they would become no more than "external things." ... Izutsu's comparative philosophy reduces all phenomena to the territory of creative imagination, or to unchanging essences. ... But Khomeinī's thesis and the Iranian Revolution broke through the wall separating "internal" from "external" (260–61).

Why exactly did Izutsu construct such a peculiar hermeneutic? I disagree with Zakipour that this aspect of his thought was merely influenced by Henry Corbin. We can already see idiosyncrasy in Izutsu's *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an,* which was originally published in English in 1959 before his direct collaboration with Corbin began. Zakipour observes that while this book describes the Qur'an as a "sacred teaching," Izutsu contradicts himself by ignoring the Qur'anic text's embeddedness within the Abrahamic tradition as well as the biographical traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, completely rejecting it as a teaching dependent on inherited knowledge and religious expertise (99). Based on this novel and rather modernist assertion, Izutsu creates a justification to completely ignore centuries of traditional Islamic exegesis or *tafsir.* (Zakipour incorrectly claims that past researchers have "said nothing" about this. While it is overlooked in Japan and perhaps Iran, Izutsu's readers in Turkey and Malaysia have been pointing this out for some years).[3]

Keeping this in mind, Zakipour seems too quick to merge Corbin with Izutsu. He writes that Izutsu adopted Corbin's "mysticism (gnosis) as an 'antidote,' so to speak, against the spread of secularism and Western intellectualism" (85), and at several points he quotes Corbin's assertion that "Shiism is the gnosis of Islam," but he never explains Corbin's definition of gnosis. For Corbin, gnosis is "not a teaching for the masses, but an initiatory teaching passed on to each specially chosen disciple."[4] Izutsu was not interested in this type of gnosis and the term "gnosis" only rarely appears in his own work. In Izutsu's conception, ultimate reality is expressed through terms like "nameless," "nothingness," "void," or "zero-point of consciousness." Hence, Izutsu's position is that regardless of whether one is speaking esoterically or exoterically, there is no special knowledge to be obtained nor teaching to be initiated into.[5] What Izutsu considers "Eastern" wisdom or knowledge is a method

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3. Ismail Albayrak, "The Reception of Toshihiko Izutsu's Qur'anic Studies in the Muslim World: With Special Reference to Turkish Qur'anic Scholarship." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14.1 (2012): 73–106.

4. Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (Boston, MA: Kegan Paul, 1983), 153.

5. Sawai Yoshitsugu, "The Structure of Reality in Izutsu's Oriental Philosophy," *Intellectual Discourse* 17 (2009): 143.

of relating between this ultimate nothingness (here meant in the Buddhistic, not nihilistic, sense) and contingent reality.

This anti-gnostic aspect of Izutsu's philosophy seems to me to fill in some blanks in Zakipour's thesis. We should consider reading Izutsu's uniquely liberal reading of the Qur'an and his segregation of the Shia imaginal from political practice in light of his beliefs about ultimate reality. We might consider that Izutsu's work focuses on the medial or revelatory imagination, which Izutsu calls "*M*-territory," because his beliefs about mystical experience and about the liminality produced in "*M*-territory" are similar to those of Muslim theologians, while his beliefs about the eternal reality ("*A*-territory") accessed through such experiences seem to differ. Izutsu could have been hesitant to enter into dialogue with political Islam precisely because it would require confronting the content of eternal truth.

Twentieth century arguments for esoteric access to traditional truths, both at the academic and religionist levels, frequently employed Corbin's language of traditional philosophy and religion as a redoubt, a mental position from which one could make a last stand against the rising tide of global "nihilism." The security of tradition, the confidence coming from a proper orientation, allowed one to "ride the tiger" of modernity. The most complete academic treatment of esoteric traditionalism to date, Mark Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004), focuses on the most committed believers in redoubt, but it became a common refrain among traditionalist intellectuals, as seen in Alaistair MacIntyre's throwaway reference to the coming of "St. Benedict" of the secular age at the end of his *After Virtue* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

Japan's attitude to the Copernican shifts of modernity is markedly different from the West, so it is not unexpected that Izutsu is among the most open-minded of the perennialist or traditionalist school of twentieth-century religious philosophers. While he envisions a "spiritual East" which conceals esoteric truths, readers will be hard pressed to identify in Izutsu's work the combative

anti-modernism of a René Guénon. What fascinates me about Zakipour's interpretation of Izutsu is that he locates in Izutsu's work the quietly outlined social and theological boundaries of his intellectual redoubt: the social in his anxious relationship with political Islam, and the theological in his definition of the "spiritual East" by a cordoned-off "*M*-territory." Furthermore, in reminding us of the warm reception Izutsu's works found among Iranian revolutionary thinkers, Zakipour shows that the undoing of these protective barriers began, if unconsciously, almost fifty years ago.

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