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The Islamic Background of Ibn Khaldūn's Political Theory

By H. A. R. GIBB

IT seems an odd coincidence that within the last three years there should have appeared four different studies devoted to the work of Ibn Khaldūn, considering that in the half-century following the issue of de Slane's translation of the *Muqaddima*,¹ apart from von Kremer's study² and a few short articles drawing the attention of a wider circle of students in various countries to its significance, it was not until 1917 that the first monograph on the subject was published by Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusain.³ This work, like most of the earlier articles, dealt primarily with the sociological aspects of Ibn Khaldūn's historical theory, and the same interest predominates in all but one of the three or four articles published since 1917. Of the latest studies it may be said that, though still giving prominence to the social aspect, they cover as a whole a rather wider ground. Dr. Gaston Bouthoul, indeed, limits himself in his title⁴ to Ibn Khaldūn's "Social Philosophy", but the contents of his essay overleap these bounds, especially the first thirty pages, devoted to a very suggestive analysis of the personality and intellectual outlook of the historian. Professor Schmidt's tractate⁵ is in the nature of a survey of the field; he assembles and examines the views of earlier writers on different aspects of Ibn Khaldūn's work, but does not put forward any synthesis of his own. Lastly, the two recent German works of Drs. Kamil Ayad⁶ and Erwin Rosenthal⁷ mark a return towards the more strictly

¹ *Les Prolegomènes historiques*, Paris, 1863-8.

² A. von Kremer, *Ibn Chaldūn und seine Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Reiche*, S.-B. Ak. Wien, 1878. Full bibliographies of the other articles will be found in any of the works mentioned below.

³ Ṭāhā Hussain, *Étude analytique et critique de la philosophie sociale d'Ibn Khaldoun*, Paris, 1917.

⁴ Gaston Bouthoul, *Ibn Khaldoun, Sa Philosophie sociale*, Paris (Geuthner), 1930, pp. 95.

⁵ Nathaniel Schmidt, *Ibn Khaldun, historian, sociologist, and philosopher*, New York (Columbia U.P.), 1930, pp. 68.

⁶ Kamil Ayad, *Die Geschichts- und Gesellschaftslehre Ibn Ḥaldūns*, 2tes. Heft der "Forschungen zur Geschichts- und Gesellschaftslehre" hrsg. v. Kurt Breysig, Stuttgart and Berlin, 1930, pp. x + 209.

⁷ Erwin Rosenthal, *Ibn Khalduns Gedanken über den Staat*, Beiheft 25 der Historischen Zeitschrift, München and Berlin (R. Oldenbourg), 1932, pp. x + 118.

historical thought of the *Muqaddima*, and the latter in particular is the first monograph to be devoted exclusively to Ibn Khaldūn's political theory.¹ The two books differ considerably in plan. Dr. Ayad, after a long and philosophical introduction on the general trends of Islamic cultural and intellectual development, displays a remarkable critical faculty and acuteness of observation in the analysis of Ibn Khaldūn's historical method, and concludes by examining in outline his social theory. Dr. Rosenthal on the other hand prefers to let Ibn Khaldūn explain himself, and describes his own work as "a modest attempt to present the historian with the material from which to construct a picture of Ibn Khaldūn's view of the State, by means of as accurate a translation as possible of the most important passages in his *Muqaddima* in which he analyses the theory of the State, together with an historical interpretation limited strictly to the text".²

In view of these admirable and very serviceable books it would be an unnecessary task to attempt to traverse the whole field of Ibn Khaldūn's political thought here. The object of the following remarks is solely to draw attention to a point which appears to the writer to be fundamental for any critical study of Ibn Khaldūn's thought, but which has been consistently overlooked or even misrepresented in most, if not all, of the works already cited. (For purposes of discussion

¹ Mention may also be made here of the Special Number issued by the Arabic journal *al-Hadīth* of Aleppo in Sept., 1932, to celebrate the sixcentenary of Ibn Khaldūn's birth. The articles, which are all from the hands of leading Arabic scholars of the present day, are somewhat unequal in value, but demonstrate the very keen interest shown in his work in modern Arabic circles. A note of dissidence is, however, introduced by the encyclopædist Farīd Waǧdī, who in a brief and rather unsatisfactory article argues that the *Muqaddima* is a work neither of sociology nor of the philosophy of history.

² The necessity for a revision of de Slane's somewhat loose translation (indispensable as it still is) has long been known to Orientalists, and it is one of the merits of R.'s book that, with some assistance from Professor Bergsträsser, he provides a much more literal and accurate version of the passages translated, so far as I have tested it. Some errors remain, however; e.g. p. 41: ". . . hat den Namen Königtum, und es ist sein Sein, das sie beherrscht" (*tusammā 'l-malakata wahīya kawnuhu yamlukuhum*); p. 97: "und auf jede einzelne von ihnen (diesen Künsten) grosse Sorgfalt zu verwenden" (*li'tta'annuqi fī kullī wāhidin ṣanā'i'u kathīratun*). Doubtful words or readings are responsible for some errors; p. 23: 'I suspect the word *'umūmiyatun* rendered as "die Bevölkerung (?)" to mean something like "complex of tribal relationships"; a few lines further on "unterstützen sie", which makes nonsense in the context, is due to an apparent error of *ma'ūnatun* for *ma'ūnatun* ("source of expense"); p. 57: "einen Genuss aus dem Streit machen (?)" has arisen from a misreading *bi'l-khilāfi* for *bi'l-khalāqi* ("enjoyment of worldly happiness").

it will be convenient to illustrate the argument more especially from the two last-named German works.) The general explanation of the deficiency referred to is to be sought in a certain tendency to exaggerate the independence and originality of Ibn Khaldūn's thought, which in turn arises from a misapprehension of his outlook, especially in its relation to religious questions.

The true originality of Ibn Khaldūn's work is to be found in his detailed and objective analysis of the political, social, and economic factors underlying the establishment of political units and the evolution of the State, and it is the results of this detailed analysis that constitute the "new science" which he claims to have founded. The materials on which his analysis is based were derived partly from his own experience—a point rightly emphasized in all these works—and partly also from the historical sources to his hand relating to the history of Islam, which he interpreted with a striking disregard of established prejudices. But the axioms or principles on which his study rests are those of practically all the earlier Sunni jurists and social philosophers. Dr. Ayad is at some pains to argue that a fundamental difference exists between Ibn Khaldūn's first principles as to the origins of society and those of his predecessors (pp. 165–6); the latter start from a global conception of "human society" (*al-mujtama' al-insānī*), whereas he starts from a dynamic conception of "human association" (*al-ijtimā'*). But apart from the evidence against this assumption to be found in the typical passage which will be quoted shortly, Dr. Ayad has almost immediately to admit (p. 168) that Ibn Khaldūn simply took over their "utilitarian" arguments, "although his conception does not wholly agree at bottom with their views." This admission is fully borne out by Ibn Khaldūn's own explanation, that the difference between the subject of his book and the observations of his predecessors lies in the fact that their statements were "not argued out as we have argued them out, but simply touched on by way of exhortation in a belletristic style", and served only as general introduction to works of an ethical character.¹ While they in pursuance of their objects have been content to summarize the historical process in general terms, he has made it his business to explain the mechanism in detail, since his object, which he admits is of subsidiary importance (*thamaratuhā . . . da'īfa*), is solely to establish criteria for the "rectification of historical narratives". In doing so, of course, he introduces many conceptions which find

¹ Muqaddima to Bk. i (Quatremère i, 65).

no place in their outline sketches, but are not in any way in contradiction to them.

Yet both Dr. Rosenthal and Dr. Ayad assert the contrary. The former remarks (p. 9) that it should be particularly emphasized that Ibn Khaldūn "on the basis of his own observations" recognizes that kingship can come about without any divine investiture or aid, and regards this (p. 12) as "an indication of independent thought, free of all theological restraint". Dr. Ayad is even more emphatic. Noting that Ibn Khaldūn does not make prophecy a prerequisite for human association, he adds (p. 114), "This proposition of Ibn Khaldūn's is openly directed against the Muslim theologians, who describe any human life as impossible without prophetic guidance," and repeats the observation (p. 169) in reference to Ibn Khaldūn's argument against the exaggerated postulates of the "philosophers".¹

If, however, we examine the actual phraseology of the Muslim theologians, we shall find that it does not bear out these assumptions. To take an extreme case I shall quote the relevant passage from a work of the kind referred to by Ibn Khaldūn and written by one of the protagonists of the strictest orthodox views, Ibn Taimiyya (d. 728/1328), two generations before him. This passage, which forms part of the general introduction to his treatise on the Censorship,² runs as follows :—

"None of mankind can attain to complete welfare, either in this world or in the next, except by association (*ijtimā'*!), co-operation, and mutual aid. Their co-operation and mutual aid is for the purpose of acquiring things of benefit to them, and their mutual aid is also for the purpose of warding off things injurious to them. For this reason it is said that "Man is a political being by nature". But when they unite together (*jama'ū*) there must of necessity be certain things which they do to secure their welfare and certain other things which they avoid because of the mischief which lies in them, and they will render obedience to the one who commands them to the attainment of those objects and restrains them from those actions of evil consequence. Moreover, all mankind must of necessity render obedience to a commander and restrainer. Those who are not possessed of divine books or who are not followers of any religion (*man lam yakun min ahli'l-kutubi'l-ilāhīyati walā min ahli dīnin*) yet obey their kings in regard to those matters wherein they believe

¹ First Muqaddima to Bk. i, section 1 (Q. i, 72).

² *Al-Ḥisba fi'l-Islām* (Cairo, Mu'ayyad Press, 1318 H.), p. 3.

that their worldly interests lie, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly." If this passage is compared with the Introduction to Book i, section 1, of the *Muqaddima*, or such a restatement as Book iii, chapter 23,¹ or the still more illuminating passage in Book v, chapter 6,² it will be seen that Ibn Khaldūn does little more than expand these ideas and give them greater precision by introducing his conception of *ʿaṣabīya*.

This example leads up to the second question—how far Ibn Khaldūn deserves to be credited with the freedom from religious bias or pre-occupations which both these writers ascribe to him? Granted at the outset that he aims at describing the phenomena of political life as he sees them to exist, and that on the basis of these empirical observations he does in fact describe them objectively and dispassionately, with a remarkable grasp of the essential characteristics of political power, the stages of its evolution, and the intricate inter-relations of the State with all aspects of human civilization. His "materialism", "pessimism", or "fatalism" has been remarked by all his commentators, on the ground that he never puts forward suggestions for the reform of the institutions which he describes so minutely, nor considers the possibility that they may be modified as the result of human effort and thought, but accepts the facts as they are and presents the cycle of states and dynasties as an inevitable and almost mechanical process. Dr. Ayad remarks, for example (p. 163), that he makes no attempt to justify history, that his principles are not theocentric (p. 97), and that he holds, "in blunt opposition to the Muslim theological view," to the doctrine of causality and natural law in history (p. 143). Further, he emphasizes (pp. 51–3) his treatment of religion "simply as a weighty cultural phenomenon and an important socio-psychological factor in the historical process", while admitting that he remained a sincerely convinced Muslim. Similarly, Dr. Rosenthal insists more than once that Ibn Khaldūn holds firmly to the doctrines of the *Shariʿa*, and that by religion he has in view the religion of Islām exclusively, yet it is one of the outstanding features of his theory that he treats religion "as no more than one factor, however important it may be" (p. 58). "Religion (he proceeds) is an important factor also in the autarchic State, but it does not alone give its content to the State, not even to the Islamic State. It is, like every phenomenon, liable to changes, at least so far as its degree of intensity and the realization of its demands are concerned. . . . The law of the State is derived from religion, but

¹ Q. i, 337–8; translated in Rosenthal, p. 39.

² Q. ii, 290, ll. 9–18

the State abstracts itself in practice from the whole compass of its validity and follows its own aims. These, however, are determined by power and lordship and extend to the wellbeing of the citizens, primarily in this world, within the body of the State. . . . Human need and human effort have founded the State as a necessity, and it exists for man. The help of God lightened his work, the divine ordinance directed him to the best way, the word of God urged him on and supported his impulse towards conquest and power. But it is not *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* that the State exists, but rather for the protection of men and the ensuring of order" (pp. 59–60). At the same time "for Islamic thought, the formulations of the Religious Law are ideal demands, and recognized as such also by Ibn Khaldūn". These two views, according to Dr. Rosenthal, exist side by side in his work, but it is the former which is at the centre of his conceptions.

It seems to me that, in spite of the efforts made by both doctors to reconcile such a view of religion and the State with the orthodox standpoint of Ibn Khaldūn, there is an unresolved contradiction between these two statements. Ibn Khaldūn was not only a Muslim, but as almost every page of the *Muqaddima* bears witness, a Muslim jurist and theologian, of the strict Mālikī school. For him religion was far and away the most important thing in life—we have seen that he expressly calls his study a thing of subsidiary value—and the *Shari'a* the only true guide. This means not just that Ibn Khaldūn was careful to safeguard himself in his arguments from the suspicion of unorthodoxy—still less that, as Dr. Ayad would have us believe, he "shows great adroitness in interpreting the Islamic Law in accordance with his view, and so seeks to subordinate religion to his own scientific theories" (p. 173)—but that he did not and could not introduce into his system anything that was logically incompatible with the Islamic standpoint. He was all the less likely to do so since, as M. Bouthoul (p. 17) points out, and as we shall have occasion to recall further on, he was by early training and inclination strongly attracted to logic and the rational sciences. Amongst his early works cited by Dr. Ayad (p. 17) was a treatise on logic, and it is this logical bent of his mind which supplies the key to the whole conception of the *Muqaddima*. Indeed, as Dr. Ayad shows more than once (pp. 57–8, 135, 159), in spite of his rejection of the logical systems of the metaphysicians, based as they were on abstract *a priori* ideas, his own insistence on the absolute validity of his deductions leads him at times into premature generalizations.

The explanation of his apparent reduction of religion to a secondary place in his exposition is that in his work he is not concerned with religion, i.e. Islām, as such, but only with the part played by religion in the outward course of history. The State occupies the central place, because it is the subject of his study. But a careful examination of the chapters which constitute the first three books of the *Muqaddima* will show that he uses the term religion in two different senses. On the one hand is religion in the true or absolute sense, when the whole will of man is governed by his religious conviction and his animal nature is held in check. Opposed to this is "acquired religion", a second-hand and relatively feeble thing, which saps his manhood and fails to control his animal impulses.¹ This distinction underlies also the chapter² "That a religious rising (*da'wa*) unsupported by *aṣabīya* is doomed to failure", upon which so much weight is placed by these investigators, for Ibn Khaldūn makes it quite clear that he is speaking of religious movements which have no divine commission behind them, and thus are religious only in the outward sense.

The ethical and Islamic basis of Ibn Khaldūn's thought is, however, implicit throughout his exposition, quite apart from his constant appeal to texts from Qur'ān and Tradition. His doctrine of causality and natural law, which in Dr. Ayad's view stands in such sharp opposition to Muslim theological views, is simply that of the *sunnat Allah* so often appealed to in the Qur'ān. Although for theological purposes it was found necessary to insist that cause and effect are not integrally connected, in so far as both the apparent cause and the apparent effect are in reality separate divine creations, yet it was accepted that God did in fact, by eternal "custom", create the appropriate "effect" after creating the "cause"; indeed, without this presupposition, the further doctrine of the special power bestowed upon prophets of "violation of natural order" (*kharq al-āda*) would have no meaning. It may, however, be allowed that Ibn Khaldūn lays much greater stress than most Muslim writers upon the inevitable working of cause and effect as "natural law".

A similar conclusion emerges from his historical theory in the strict sense. The association of men for mutual assistance "fulfils the wise purpose of God for their survival and preservation of the species", and without it there would not be perfected "what God has willed for the population of the world by them and His establish-

¹ Cf. esp. Bk. ii, chap. 6, translated in R., pp. 68-9 (Q. i, 230-2), and ii, 27 (Q. i, 275).

² Bk. iii, chap. 6 (Q. i, 286-90), translated in R., p. 54.

ment of them as His vicegerents".¹ The institution of kingship is likewise ordained by God, whether it be good or evil,² and the *'aṣabīya* which furnishes the mechanism whereby it is attained is itself due to the aid of God.³ Thus even the civil state exists as part of the divine purpose. Ibn Khaldūn then goes on to recognize several varieties of states, classified according to their laws.⁴ This passage is particularly worth attention, in view of the express statements of Dr. Rosenthal that Ibn Khaldūn "passes no judgments of value and prefers no form of State over another" (p. 47), and of Dr. Ayad that "he refrains *on principle* from judgments of value" (p. 123). "The state (says Ibn Khaldūn) whose law is based upon violence and superior force and giving full play to the irascible nature is tyranny and injustice and in the eyes of the Law blameworthy, a judgment in which also political wisdom concurs. Further, the state whose law is based upon rational government and its principles, without the authority of the *Sharī'a*,⁵ is likewise blameworthy, since it is the product of speculation without the light of God . . . and the principles of rational government aim solely at worldly interests." Opposed to both of these stands the Caliphate as the only perfect state, being based on the true practice of the *Sharī'a*, which furthers both the temporal and spiritual interests of its subjects.⁶

The central position which the Caliphate or ideal state occupies in Ibn Khaldūn's thought may be supported by another argument. It has been remarked above that Ibn Khaldūn develops his thesis along strictly logical lines, and a glance at the sequence of his chapters shows that they lead up to and culminate in the Caliphate.⁷ Having

¹ Bk. i, ch. 1, 1st Muqaddima (Q. i, 70-1).

² Bk. ii, ch. 20 (Q. i, 259-60).

³ Bk. iii, ch. 4 (Q. i, 284).

⁴ Bk. iii, ch. 25, translated in R., 61-2 (Q. i, 342-3).

⁵ De Slane's translation misses the point of the phrase *min ghairi naẓari'shshar'i* inserted in Q. after *bi-muqtaḍā's-siyāsati wa' aḥkāmihā*.

⁶ The same judgment is expressed in a slightly different fashion in Bk. ii, ch. 20 (Q. i, 259-60), from which it is clear that Ibn Khaldūn's connotation of the term Caliphate is general and not restricted to the historical Caliphate.

⁷ It is the chief defect of Dr. Rosenthal's otherwise admirable survey of Ibn Khaldūn's political thought that he has overlooked the logical sequence of his exposition, and by shuffling about his chapters unwittingly distorts his point of view. For example, in the section headed "The evolution of the State" the order of the passages which he has selected is as follows:—Bk. ii, ch. 15; iii, 14; iii, 17; ii, 16; iii, 15; ii, 18; iii, 11; iii, 12; iii, 16; ii, 22; iii, 2; iii, 3; ii, 4; ii, 5; ii, 23; iii, 7; iii, 8; iii, 18; iii, 10; iii, 13; iii, 47; iii, 46.

reached this point he halts to discuss in elaborate detail the organization associated with the Caliphate,¹ before passing on to investigate the causes of the decay of the State and its final destruction. It is in the course of this discussion that he explains the gradual transformation of the historical Arab Caliphate into an ordinary kingship,² as due to the force of *'aṣabīya* amongst the Umayyad family (though not, in his view, amongst the early Umayyad rulers themselves) regaining an ascendancy over the religious enthusiasm which had restrained it in the time of the early Caliphs.

Thus it is impossible to avoid the impression that Ibn Khaldūn, besides setting out to analyse the evolution of the State, was, like the other Muslim jurists of his time, concerned with the problem of reconciling the ideal demands of the *Sharī'a* with the facts of history. The careful reader will note how he drives home the lesson, over and over again, that the course of history is what it is because of the infraction of the *Sharī'a* by the sin of pride, the sin of luxury, the sin of greed.³ Even in economic life it is only when the ordinances of the *Sharī'a* are observed that prosperity follows.⁴ Since mankind will not follow the *Sharī'a* it is condemned to an empty and unending cycle of rise and fall, conditioned by the "natural" and inevitable consequences of the predominance of its animal instincts. In this sense Ibn Khaldūn may be a "pessimist" or "determinist", but his pessimism has a moral and religious, not a sociological, basis.

¹ Dr. Ayad points out that Ibn Khaldūn denies that the Caliphate (or Imāmate) is one of the "pillars of the faith", but fails to observe that it is the *Shi'ite* doctrine that he rejects, and that in his arguments against the rational necessity of the Caliphate (iii, 26; Q. i, 345-6) he is in complete agreement with the classical doctrine expounded by al-Māwardī (p. 4).

² Bk. iii, ch. 28 (Q. i, 367 ff.); note especially *walam yazhari 'ltaghayyuru illā fi'l-wāzi'i 'lādhi kāna dīnan thumma 'nqalaba 'aṣabīyatan wa-saifan* (Q. 375, 9-10). This instance brings out clearly that what Ibn Khaldūn means by "natural" development in social and political life is very different from the mechanical doctrine which Dr. Ayad regards as the outstanding feature of his theory.

³ M. Bouthoul's accusation (p. 88) that Ibn Khaldūn's outlook is governed by a kind of intellectual sadism, characteristic of "mediaeval mentality", appears to me very wide of the mark. Cf. again Bk. v, ch. 6 (Q. ii, 290).

⁴ Bk. iii, ch. 38 (Q. ii, 79).