THE PRISON OF CATEGORIES—‘DECLINE’
AND ITS COMPANY

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Historiography of Islamic societies and their secularized successors often suffers under the burden of century-old categories, values, expectations, approaches, and judgments. Despite all the far-reaching changes in the concepts, methodologies, methods, and values introduced by various fields of postmodern engagement, substantial parts of history-writing with regard to Islamic societies have successfully escaped a reflective questioning of the assumptions, tools, values, and goals held or pursued by their practitioners. Categories such as ‘decline’ and judgments such as the suppression of philosophy and other ‘ancient sciences’ by religious orthodoxy and worldly rulers have survived until this day either as accepted truth or as statements to be proved wrong by counter-examples.¹ Nineteenth-century inventions such as the death of philosophy after Ibn Rušd caused by al-Ġazālī’s sharp accusation of being internally incoherent and fundamentally incompatible with revelation continue to be told and believed within and outside the Arab world.² Unanswerable questions such as why there was no

¹ I use the label ‘ancient sciences’ as a short-cut for geometry, number theory, astronomy, astrology, theoretical music, philosophy, medicine, alchemy and other fields of scholarly knowledge appropriated from Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi, and Sanskrit sources.

² Mohammed Arkoun has expressed his belief that philosophy in the Islamic world disappeared after Ibn Rušd’s death in a public lecture at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University International, London, 2006. Research results of the last two decades have discredited, however, this judgment for Islamic societies in Iran and India. Historical sources such as biographical dictionaries, study programs and historical chronicles leave no doubt that philosophical treatises by Ibn Sinā (d. 428/1037), Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Naṣīr ad-Dīn at-Tūsī (d. 672/1274) or Gālāl ad-Dīn ad-Dawwānī (d. 907/1501) were studied at madrasas in Cairo, Damascus or even in cities of northern Africa. See, for instance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), History of Islamic Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1996); Dimitri Gutas, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, 1000–ca. 1350,” in Avicenna and His Heritage, eds. J. Janssens and D. De Smet (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 81–97. In his entry “Islamic Philosophy” in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2000), q.v., Leaman reformulated the old view of philosophy’s demise by writing that due to al-Ġazālī’s demand to reject philosophy it came to be under a cloud until the nineteenth century. He also affirmed
scientific revolution in Islamic societies are considered relevant and holding the key for today’s conflicts and difficulties. Concepts outside of time and independent of concrete space such as ‘Arabic,’ ‘Islamic’ or ‘Arabic-Islamic’ science/s dominate the approaches to the study of history of science in Islamic societies. Creatures of nostalgia such as ‘Golden Age’ or ‘Islamic/Muslim Renaissance’ continue to inspire professionals and amateurs alike while glossing over the fact that most localities in the vast realm of the Islamic world in the ninth, tenth, eleventh, etc. centuries were free and empty of any person that practiced the ‘ancient sciences.’ Oppositions of all sorts such as ‘rationality’ versus ‘superstition’ or ‘religion,’ (Catholic and later Protestant and secular) ‘Europe’ versus the ‘Islamic World,’ ‘Christianity’ versus ‘Islam,’ or ‘progress’ versus ‘decline’ continue their existence as if immutable and outside of history. Rarely anyone asks whether the entities set up against each other for the sake of mobilizing the one or the other set of values and gaining a platform for evaluation did exist in the period under debate and if so in which form and with what meaning. The elementary message of postmodernist critiques that there is no narrative about the past independent from our present and that


5 http://www.imarabe.org/temp/expo/sciences-arabes.html